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A not-for-profit fan project by Samantha Calthrop
www.samanthacalthrop.com

Stepdaughter of Bhaal

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A story about a bard, a tadpole, and a dead girl named Imoen.

(The bizarre Baldur's Gate 3 novelisation that nobody asked for.)

For my father,
and also, by extension, for Aristes

Chapter 1

What leads a man to become immortal?

The pursuit of power is a liquor whose addictive and corrosive qualities have been examined in great detail, by better scholars than I, and to no definitive conclusion as to its nature. The noble seek to change the world for the better; the evil to change it for their glory. Look to the legendary Drizz't Do'urden, who walked among gods in relentless pursuit of right. Look to Azuth, whose fascinations led him spiralling away from his humanity and into the arcane bosom of Mystra's godhood. Look to Bhaal—

Bhaal, father of my child, a splintered god who was once born a man. Inside the heart of the God of Murder, was there passion? Was there longing? Dissatisfaction?

Surely there was. Those of us who toil in the service of the gods, whose magic brings us to brush the fingers of the divine, know well that the gods have minds and souls not so different to our own. Why do people seek to achieve godhood? Because they perceive that the flaws in the world can be fixed, with enough force. Those flaws, of course, are as numerous as the people that exist within the Material Planes, for every creature born will experience pain and dissatisfaction.

What leads a man to become a god? I have seen wizards driven mad by the pursuit of forbidden knowledge and heroes cut down in pursuit of justice. What leads a man, who is comfortable and full-bellied, to pursue riches? What leads the bandit to cast aside his conscience and set upon a life of crime? What leads us, born naked, with empty hands and clear minds, to grow into beings that learn magic, wield swords, write books, and desire something so wretched as power, in all its gruesome forms?

Every villain that has threatened to bring this world to an end has been the same; a fool who knew what he wanted, but not what he needed. And every hero that saved it was driven by the flaws of the heart; sentimentality, love, duty, guilt. I only hope my ward grows up with enough common sense to refuse the siren call of godhood. There are far better ways to resolve one's personal issues.

If only time would halt, and destiny spare us its suffering. Pity us, in our cloisters, left powerless to the whims of fools whose emotions scream louder than their minds! Someone have mercy upon us all. Although whose mercy might ever truly help us, I know not.

-From the private writings of Gorion of Candlekeep, 1338 DR

Chapter 2

Pandemonium. Outside are the sounds of people screaming and rubble crashing. The tentacled ship attacking the city is getting closer, you can tell by the sounds of the buildings collapsing. Above the commotion is the occasional glance of a dragon, their colours obscured by the glare of the sun, tailing the ship.

If they're here to save the city, they're not doing it fast enough. Not for you, anyway. You sprint down the academy halls with all the speed and might contained in the three feet and no inches of you. You burst open one classroom door: nothing. The next: Empty. Finally in the music classroom you find Jerryl, curled up on the floor and shaking with silent tears. He clutches a leather lute case and holds it in a tight, terrified embrace.

Jerryl is just seven years old, although given you're a halfling and he's a human he's almost bigger than you are. His intellectual genius ensured his entry to the Academy, but he's easily overwhelmed and poor with instructions, and you're not surprised he got separated from the other kids. You dive to the floor next to him, trying to keep your hands steady and professional as you shake him. He stares at you with tears rolling down his face.

"Jerryl," you say urgently, "You've got to run. Get to the basement. Master Adrian will keep you safe. Up, up—"

He trembles as you coax him up. There's another crash outside, the thunderous sound of crunching brick and wood. You take the lute-case from him and sling its strap around your shoulders, looking him over for injuries. None, but he stumbles as you guide him out of the classroom and into the hall, moving as fast as you can with your hands planted on his shoulders as they are.

"Miss Tavernsong, I'm scared," he whimpers, "I don't want to die."

"You're not going to die, pet, I'm here, Master Adrian has a ward up, it'll protect you. Come on, we've got to run, take—"

SLAM. A tentacle, black and wet and thicker than the columns that hold the roof of the Temple to Waukeen, presses against the windows as though it's peering in, turning the room dark. Its slimy tip curls, and, as though the walls were made of crackers, it effortlessly crunches through with a crash of falling bricks and shattering glass.

Jerryl screams. The door isn't far. You spin to put yourself between the tentacle and the boy and shove, screaming at him: "*RUN!*"

He turns to look back at you, eyes wide, and you start to tell him again, regretting that perhaps your last act will be to die in front of this poor child, immortalising you forever as a traumatic memory. *Fuck it*, you think, and reach for the lute on your back, undoing the leather buckle that holds it closed. You attempt to pull the lute free, wracking your brain for your mother's spells, anything that will buy him time, buy *you* time, anything at all—

But before your hands can even brush the neck of the lute, the tentacle lurches forward and touches you, and everything is over.

Darkness. Wetness. A cocoon of warm fleshy liquid, holding you like a womb.

A mind flayer, its face far more alive than you expected, its tentacles writhing and thrashing eagerly. Tilting your chin. Opening your eye.

The tadpole, swimming through your brain and squirming with ecstasy as its small fetid mind links with yours.

Then oblivion.

Gods damn it! You were supposed to make it to a decent part of middle age at least, like a hundred and fifty or so. Instead you're here, stuck in the world's worst nap pod, incubating some mind flayer's disgusting little baby. How long do you have? Days? Hours? You haven't read anything about mind flayers, because when you go to bed you prefer to sleep peacefully with no nightmares. And they don't even have the decency to knock you unconscious. They'll probably leave you awake once the tentacled thing bursts out of your skull and sprouts legs.

There is nothing to do in your flesh pod except close your eyes and feel bad about the universe, and you do it with a vengeance. Being captured aboard a plane-hopping mind flayer ship with a parasite in your head is the kind of thing that happens in adventure chapbooks. It wasn't supposed to happen to *you*. This is not how you expected to die.

You don't know how long you lie there. But it scares the *shit* out of you when someone taps on the pod.

You scream. The man jumps. He's a young human with one eye. the other is a polished stony-looking prosthetic. That, his scars, and the rapier at his side peg him as an adventurer,

which explains why you vaguely recognise him from somewhere. The kids are big into adventurers.

"Don't worry!" he shouts, the sound muffled as it makes its way through your fleshy prison. "I'm going to get you out of there!"

Ah. You're going to be dying a more interesting death than you expected, then. But you'd much rather transform into a mind flayer somewhere shitty, so the resulting baby mind flayer can at least have a troubled start to its existence, so you nod eagerly as he moves aside, fiddling with something you can't see.

The air that rushes in when the pod opens is humid and warm, but it's as fresh and cold as a mug of ale compared to the fleshpod. You have just enough time to think *hey, I wonder what's keeping me upright* before you collapse directly out of the pod and onto your saviour, who has enough grace to catch you.

You hear the distinct *twang* of a lute being dropped as you fall – apparently it was in there with you, along with the case still on your back.

You gasp. You cough out some ungodly mind flayer substance, which doesn't bear thinking about. You're pleased to hear that your vocal cords still work as you spit, "Brandobaris's *bollocks!*"

Your rescuer steadies you on your feet. It's not hard, given that he's about twice your height. You reckon if he were a halfling he'd still be a fair bit younger than you, but it's difficult to say, especially since the lighting in this rancid ship is not flattering.

The floor is hard, but not dry. it's cartilaginous and sticky, and the whole place is made up of bones and flesh arranged into furniture shapes, which would be nightmarish if you weren't already a dead woman living on borrowed time and therefore immune to terror. Your pod is one of several in a circle, two of which are open – yours, and the one your rescuer emerged from, presumably.

On the floor, stained with Ilithid substances not worth describing, is Jerryl's lute-case. You pick it up and sling it on your back.

Where *is* Jerryl?

Perhaps you're better off not knowing.

"Believe it or not, those are the friendliest words I've heard in a while," the man grins, although the seriousness of the situation hasn't missed him. there's a grim edge to his expression, hiding either exhaustion or terror, or both. "Are you alright? I don't know if–"

He cuts himself off, wincing, and you're about to ask him what's wrong when you feel it too. Your thoughts *squirm*. Something small and wriggly and wormlike swims through all five of your senses, everywhere at once, and a wave of dizziness makes you grab your pod for stability.

ORDER – JUSTICE – THE FRONTIER – THE BARGAIN – THE DEVIL – THE MISSION

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You press your palm to the side of your skull and urge the squirming to stop. Out of the corner of your eye you see your rescuer stumbling and holding his head. You feel his thoughts, glimpse at his memories; your personality, the shape of your thoughts, changes shape to match his, and you feel a burning determination edged with terrible fear. For a moment, you can't remember whether or not you're *you*. Then you start to sort his memories from yours, and realise you've stolen a handful of his thoughts.

Eventually the sensation passes entirely, and you're left staring at each other awkwardly, tadpole host to another.

"Well, at least our worms are acquainted," he says, and shoots you a shaky grin. "I'm Wyll. They call me the Blade of the Frontiers, in some circles of Baldur's Gate. If you're a bard, perhaps you've heard the name..."

For a moment you're offended to be called a bard simply for having a lute-case on your back, but it occurs to you that it's more likely he sensed the knowledge in your brain. "A bard who's out of practice, sorry. The bard Evening Tavernsong, daughter of Sunrise Tavernsong."

This is the way your mother made you introduce yourself as a child, and for some reason it rolls off your tongue before you can even think about it. You are not a bard. In fact, you specifically make an effort *not* to be called a bard, because you have a *real* job. You have a *salary*, for god's sake.

Wyll doesn't seem to notice your displeasure. "Well met," he nods, his attention already turning away from you and to the remaining pods in the room. "We need to get off this ship as soon as possible. Cover my back, I'm going to see if I can get these people free. Are you armed?"

You remove Jerryll's lute from its case. You pluck the strings with nervous fingers, as though the lute might pop when you touch it, but nothing dramatic happens. Just notes of out-of-tune music. You strum a chord. "For now," you say.

You place yourself between Wyll and the 'door', which is a truly horrible sphincter muscle shape. Wyll strides over to the next pod, looks inside, mutters, "Empty," and looks at the next. He taps the pod's lid. After a moment he begins manipulating the pod's console, frowning.

You are reasonably sure if something dangerous comes through the door, the most useful thing you will be able to do is take long enough getting killed for Wyll to gather his wits together. Celestia knows he's got better chances than you do of getting out of here.

A hiss. The next pod opens. Will curses. "Dead," he says. "I guess the mind flayers weren't too careful with everyone they kidnapped."

He gestures at the console and the pod snaps closed again. You tail him as he moves on, eyeing him as he reaches the next console.

"How are you doing that?" you ask him, watching him brush his fingertips against one of the console's gelatinous nodules.

He shrugs. "Something psychic and illithid, I think. I certainly didn't know how to operate mind flayer pods before today."

The pod cracks open. He looks past the foul-smelling vapour escaping from within and clicks his tongue.

"Empty. I should have checked. Where is she?"

"Who are you looking for?" you ask, as Wyll moves to the final pod.

He doesn't get a chance to respond. There's a deep rumble from elsewhere in the ship, and the sinewy walls twitch as though responding. The sound reminds you how quiet the room you're in is, surrounded only by the dripping and hissing of the living ship-tissue. Wyll frowns. "What was—"

There's the sound of a thunderous explosion. The room shakes violently, a vicious lurch sending both you and Wyll flying through the air. squelching, splashing sounds follow, as the room's flesh contents are thrown askew and the 'machinery' takes damage. You're thrown against a thankfully-soft wall, although the force is still enough to knock the wind out of you.

For a dizzy moment, the world seems to spin. then the sensation begins to abate, and eventually you catch your breath and orient yourself.

You're leaning some distance from where you were, having narrowly missed slamming into one of the pods. Wyll is still at the last pod, clinging to the console for stability even as he manipulates its controls.

The lid hisses open, and its occupant collapses onto the floor. He's another human man, and he's fortunately alive. He has the same wizard robes and staff as the masters at the Academy. For a wizard, he's shockingly well-groomed; most of the old Candlekeep scholars are scraggly-haired, footlong-bearded senior citizens who still remember Sarevok. This man has an earring hanging from one ear and hair that had once, in a different life before the pod, been nice.

He splutters as Wyll helps him to his feet, clutching his chest. Both of them are silent for a moment, wincing and gasping. Something in your head squirms with recognition. Another dizzy moment.

Once the wizard catches his breath, he asks, "What plane are we on?"

Wyll grimaces. "Infernal."

"*Infernal?!?*" You don't mean to raise your voice, but the response comes squealing out of you before you have the chance to stop it. "We're in the *Hells?!?*"

Wyll winces. "It's a nautiloid. It teleported itself here to escape the Githyanki. It won't be long before devils overrun the ship and bring it down - we could try and take control of the ship in the confusion, but..."

The wizard shakes his head. "No need. I can get us out of here."

"You can?" You hear a note of disbelief in Wyll's voice. Heck, *you* find that hard to believe – a teleportation spell for a couple of paces away is pretty expensive, let alone one that goes *all the way to Hell and back*. It doesn't seem to bother the wizard. He speaks with professional confidence.

"Maybe. I need a flat, vertical surface. A wall, smoother than these." He gestures to your surroundings. "And a bit of time."

The ship rumbles again, although the resulting tremor is weak enough that you don't lose your balance.

"How much time?" Wyll asks.

The wizard begins to answer, "That depends—"

The sphincter serving as the room's entrance bursts open with an indescribably awful squelch. Something red and scaly flies through. The air that rushes through is hot and smoky, and laced with the smell of sulphur.

A cat-sized imp, wings burned to smoking stubs, collapses in front of the three of you, screeches, and dies. Beyond the doorway is a deck, and beyond the deck is the distant fiery sky of the Hells;

the air shakes with the roaring of steel and the cries of battle. More imps flutter above, flying in swarms, waving little scimitars and crossbows. The red dragons are apparently still tailing the Nautiloid, because one flies distantly overhead, doing battle with a pair of winged devils.

Wyll seems more interested in the battle than the imp. he scans the deck, frowning. "It's carnage out there," he says, "I doubt we can buy you more than a few minutes."

The wizard grimaces. "It'll have to do."

The memory of your mother's voice rings in your ear: *Watch. Remember. Recount. It's your job.*

"What's your name?" you ask the wizard.

"Gale," he says, and gives you a haggard smile. "Of Waterdeep. Charmed, I'm sure."

You write the names *Gale* and *Wyll* in the notebook of your mind as you follow them onto the war-torn deck.

You're not the only civilians running around. You spot two dwarves loyally flanking a mind flayer as it heads towards a horde of imps, shields raised to protect the ilithid. Dead bodies, in a disparity of types, litter the deck. Mind flayers, devils, Githyanki; all twisted and bloody now. A half-elf and a githyanki cross the deck in the distance, vanishing into another sphincter-door before they notice you.

"There!" Wyll points. "That wall over there. Will it do?"

He points to where the two thralls entered into the ship. A stiff, smooth, cartilaginous wall made of a material that looks like seashell.

"We'll never know if we don't try, will we?" Gale grins.

The mind flayer parasite twinges inside your skull. With the psychic tadpole paying attention, you can practically feel the doubt rolling off in waves. He doesn't think you'll make it.

He begins to murmur. The syllables are difficult to make out, but you can hear them gently rattling off the surface of the Weave in a clockwork-precise rhythm. Wizard-magic; the sound of a ritual building up.

You and Wyll put your backs to the muttering Gale, watching the Infernal horde tearing through the deck. Ilithid creatures pass by – little brains on legs, people walking around with their skulls caved in – all ignoring you, like you're part of the scenery.

"Zariel will have sent her forces after the nautiloid as soon as it got here," says Wyll, glancing around as though the archdevil herself might appear at any moment. "Maybe even dragged it here herself. They won't stop until they've torn this ship to shreds."

"At least it's devils and not demons," you note.

Wyll shudders. "At least there's that."

The wind isn't fresh. It's hot and sulphurous, distinctly different to what you're used to. You remember the unsettling fact that you're on another plane of existence, and decide to find something else to occupy your thoughts than your surroundings. You take Jerryl's lute and begin to tune the strings, hoping the hot air doesn't snap them.

You listen out for the reverberations of the Weave as you twist the pegs. It sounds muffled, choked, as though coming through a blanket, but it sings as clearly as it always has. The sound of magic in the air, dormant for now.

You listen carefully as you pluck the chanterelle, your uncalled fingers stinging as you narrow in a clear, sharp G. As the note fades you can hear danger ringing its wake, the sound of the Weave tensing up.

Something's coming! You strum a chord, filling your body with the dizzy heat of bardic magic. You feel it pour out of your belly and out through your lungs. Your lips, without your consent, form the words: "*Spawn of hell, forgone and wretched, come forth!*"

The taste of magic fills your mouth. It's shocking what a bit of iambic pentameter can do when it comes into contact with the Weave.

The spell snags the wings of a human-shaped devil as it comes crashing in just short of pulverising Wyll. Your magic tugs the devil off-balance, and it brings its sword down on nothing but air, but hell's *bells* it's a close miss. The devil, for its part, looks extremely pissed-off about it.

It raises his sword again and the tip of Wyll's rapier bursts from the devil's chest in a spray of sulphurous-smelling blood.

Wyll kicks the devil in the back and it collapses, gurgling, onto the ground.

He shoots you a grin. "Nicely done. Heads up – more of them."

Following the devil come several imps. They babble incoherently as they descend on small, scaly wings, and the sight of the dead devil seemingly enrages them. Their chattering suddenly turns vicious, and they begin to crawl towards Wyll, battered weapons raised.

Gale, for his part, continues to mumble. You can sense power building up in the words, although not nearly enough of it that you'll be getting out of here anytime soon.

You run towards Wyll. He skewers one imp with his rapier and uses his free hand to bat another away from his face, then cries out as a third one sinks its teeth into his leg. you spot a fourth hovering in the air a few paces away from him, aiming a crossbow and cackling. You feel yourself slipping into the rhythm of battle, warm and familiar as a childhood blanket.

Here's the trick: Bardic magic is subjective. Bards do especially well with heroes; they fit neatly into narratives, interact easily with the other characters of the story that is the battlefield. Wyll has a steady, lilting kind of magical rhythm, and you time the beat of your magic with him for a moment. *"Fiend, today you die a craven death!"*

The imp lets loose a bolt and it shoots directly into the imp climbing his leg, and Wyll, on cue with the beat, clears the distance and stabs the final imp. The music sends you dancing backwards, urging you elsewhere on the stage like an impatient director. without realising your fingers are flying, filling the air with the notes of *Bard Dance #5 in G Major* as though you've been playing the damn thing your whole life.

"Duck!" Wyll shouts, but you can feel the Weave pulling you out of harm's way as he does, and you barely need to dip. he throws out his free hand and shoots a burst of sparking red force thrumming through the air above you, striking right into the eye of a hellboar that was charging towards the two of you.

The hellboar roars angrily, half-blind, and follows the sound of your lute as you skip backwards; you match your steps to the music and the boar twists, exposing its flank to Wyll, and a second bolt of magic shoots through its side and kills it for good. You hear more of them, making noises that *just about* don't resemble the sounds of real boars. Too fleshy.

The memory of your mother whispers, *Bardic magic is subjective. Pick out the sound, in the endless silent melody that is Weave, of your victory. As long as you play your part correctly, the rest of the world will follow.*

Behind the hellboars stride two cambion warriors. You're surprised to find yourself recognising cambions; you've never seen one before. But these two devils are *clearly* half-human. the look in their eyes, the *perception*, is unmistakable. You can hear the sound of death drilling into your skull, your song suddenly losing certainty and force.

"Gale," Wyll calls, clearly trying to suppress a note of panic, "Can that spell of yours go any faster?"

"Ad maiorem Mystra gloriam – I'm going as fast as I can," Gale spits the words out mid-chant, but it clearly takes him some effort. "Get me one more minute!"

The nautiloid lurches. The force nearly knocks you over, and it sends your lute flying out of your hands. There's a distinct *crunch*. Gale, to his credit, doesn't stop muttering.

From somewhere behind you, you hear Wyll roar, "*Hells!*"

You turn around to look and see a *red fucking dragon* swooping towards you. You shut your eyes and see red through your eyelids for a moment, feeling a wave of hot air rush over you; but it's hot, not burning, and to your relief you see the jet was aimed not at you but at the hellboars, who burn to a pork-smelling crisp.

The dragon pulls back into the air, letting you get a look at its Githyanki rider. You've never seen a Githyanki in real life. His skin is less green than you imagined, and his silver sword and armour are much less shiny and noble than you imagined, too. There are more of them, draconic figures in the air, killing hellspawn and mind flayer spawn alike.

The githyanki, you know, travel across planes to hunt and kill mind flayers wherever they go. you *would* be relieved to see them, only it's clear that what the githyanki are hoping to do is crash the ship into the fires of Avernus with you on it.

The dragon hovers in the air a moment, and its rider turns to look directly at you. A chill runs down your spine. You're a mind flayer thrall, after all – they have no reason not to kill you. Hell, you've not really got a good reason not to *die*.

Luckily the Githyanki spends too long staring at you and not at the cambions. An arrow embeds itself into a gap between his pauldron and cuirass, and his yell of pain makes the dragon whirl around and face the pair of half-devils, who flap their wings and take to the air, gunning towards the githyanki with murderous intent.

The air is beginning to crackle with power. Whatever Gale is doing, it's working. You start to back towards him.

The dragon-rider and the cambions circle each other.

A burst of bright violet light erupts from the wall as Gale chants, burning a white-hot sigil into its surface. You look for your lute and see it lying on the ground, charred to a crisp. Gale reaches out a hand and touches the sigil, and energy starts to swirl around it. He turns to look at you and you see the left side of his face is glowing, an electric-blue vein of light running down his cheek and vanishing out of sight down his neck.

"Alright," he says, "That should—"

Something hits the nautiloid.

The sky spins. You're thrown against the wall with so much speed you can't breathe, your vision swimming as the back of your skull slams the hard surface. Gale howls. There's a bright, searing flash of light.

The nautiloid continues to spin.

You crank your aching head sideways. Gale, unlike you, appears to be slowly sinking into the wall. His sigil sparks and crackles like a malfunctioning gnomish machine. His shoulder disappears inside, the rest of him slowly being engulfed in glowing purple light. your eyes meet his, and you see panic growing in his face.

The sky starts to change colour.

"Take my hand!" Gale shouts. "Quickly!"

No sign of Wyll. Your limbs can't move from the wall. The sigil continues to absorb Gale, spitting and crackling, and he wrenches an arm towards you only to be pulled screaming out of reach a moment later.

Shit.

Your stomach lurches and the world, for a moment, flickers. The whirling air suddenly turns cold, and the smell of sulphur vanishes, assaulting your senses with familiarity. Fresh air. Blue skies. The dragon and the cambions vanish, replaced with...

...certain doom. Back in the normal world of physics, you can do nothing but hurtle through the air and scream.

Yondalla have mercy, you think, This is it.

Another lurch. Another slam to the back of your head. Then darkness.

Running water.

You're standing in a shallow river. The water is cool and soothing as it flows against your bare skin, through your toes.

She stands next to you in the water. She's instantly familiar to you, and so intensely beautiful it takes your breath away. a drow, with pearly-white hair and grey skin as deep as a cloudless night. She has soft eyes, and they radiate an enchanting warmth.

She feels so safe – so familiar – that it takes you a long moment to realise you have no idea who she is.

"Where am I?" you ask. "Am I dead?"

She smiles. She has little white freckles on her dimples.

"No, Eve," she tells you, "You are very much alive."

The sound of your name in her voice makes your stomach flutter.

"Who are you?" you ask. "Am I dreaming?"

The sky is bright. But the stars are, too; a swirling aurora of light and colour. The river. The ruins.

"Consider me your guardian," she says. "And yes, you are. But it's time to wake up. We don't have much time."

You try to ask her to stay. You want to plead. But you can't speak.

The world begins to fade.

Chapter 3

For the second time that day, you wake up with Wyll staring you in the face and scream immediately.

Wyll only flinches a little this time.

"Easy, my friend!" he says, raising his palms. "You're safe. We're home."

You sit up slowly, triggering a disparity of aches and pains through your body. Your muscles aren't happy with all the dancing around casting magic you were doing, it seems.

The sand you're sitting on is blissfully normal and non-fleshy, although smoking chunks of Nautiloid still litter the beach you find yourself on. You can hear lapping waves and rustling trees.

The sky. The beach. This is indeed home, peaceful and safe as a skull with no tadpoles in it. Small mercies.

"How did we survive the crash?" you ask. "Where are we?"

Wyll gives you a wry grin. "Those were going to be my next questions."

Another squirm in your skull – you can feel Wyll's presence in your head somehow, like a closed door etched on the inside of your skull. Wyll's awareness prods at yours and brings up the memory of a disembodied voice, matching it up with his own. you get a sense of that strange familiarity, the same warmth, of the dream guardian.

She was real, then. Your heart skips a beat.

"We were both saved by the same mysterious entity, it seems." Wyll gestures around him. "Not everyone shared our fortune."

You follow his gaze enough to glimpse two smoking, destroyed corpses in the sand before you decide you would prefer not to be looking.

"What happened to..." You pause to search your memory. "Gale?"

"I don't know," Wyll says, "There's no sign of him. I suppose that's a good thing."

You recall the look of panic that flitted across his face as the portal sucked him in. "I suppose so."

Wyll helps you to your feet. It's the early morning; the sun is bright, but not yet hot. The cool, peaceful air and lapping waves feel strange. You feel as though you've stolen a handful of hours from death, as though the gods have deigned to let you get a little fresh air and sunlight before bumping you off.

The parasite that the mind flayers put in you wriggles behind your eye, as though expressing its enthusiasm over the idea of slowly killing you.

"We're going to be dead in a matter of days," you note.

Wyll grimaces. "We're not dead *yet*," he says, "That's got to count for something. There could be a cure, some cleric or healer who knows what to do... Although our first concern should probably be finding out our exact location on the Sword Coast."

"If this *is* the Sword Coast."

"It is." He doesn't sound smug, just certain. "I'd know the Sword Coast anywhere. They don't call me the Blade of Frontiers for nothing."

You glance around the beach. "They call you the Blade of Frontiers?"

"The Baldur's Mouth Gazette does, mostly," he admits, "But I think it suits me. Simple, sharp, and found in the wilds. And it's anonymous, too. I could do worse."

It doesn't surprise you that Wyll is well-known enough to appear in the *Gazette*. Chronicles of the exploits of young Baldurian adventurers are all the rage these days. The kids at the academy practically have their own barter economy, with all the pamphlets and magazines about adventuring. Wyll is probably a celebrity to them.

Plus now that he's in direct sunlight, you can see that he's remarkably handsome, even with the many scars criss-crossing his otherwise unblemished black skin. Combined with his pleasant and seemingly sane personality, he ticks every box for a classic fairy-tale folk hero adventurer. He's probably doing wonders for the recruitment efforts of the Baldurian Adventurer's Guild.

"Although between friends, I'd much prefer to just be called Wyll," says Wyll. "Which is to say – please. Call me Wyll."

Friends? Yes, you suppose so. You like Wyll; it's hard not to. With the same near-death experiences in both the past *and* future, it's obvious that you two will be sticking together, probably for the rest of your lives, which will likely be very short.

"I just think you should never give up hope," Wyll shrugs.

"Don't be mucking about in my thoughts."

"Sorry."

You glance up and down the strand, looking for any sign of where to go, but you're at the bottom of a grassy cliff and surrounded by nondescript rocks and sand.

You look at Wyll cluelessly, Wyll looks at you cluelessly, and the two of you pick a random direction and start walking.

The morning is bright and clear, and rings with birdsong, creating an odd discordance every time you pass a patch of smoking flesh debris. It seems the nautiloid fell apart mid-air and scattered all over the surrounding landscape. It is, in retrospect, very lucky that you weren't struck and crushed to death while you were unconscious in the sand.

"So," says Wyll.

"So," you say.

"How did Evening Tavernsong, daughter of Sunrise Tavernsong, come to be guarding a child from an Illithid invasion? I caught a glimpse of it through that little peek into your mind I got."

Wyll does a shockingly good job at making this statement sound normal. It almost makes you snort.

"Jerry! One of the boarding students at the Unrolling Scroll Temple Academy," you answer.

"One of the masters shepherded the children to the basement as soon as the alarms began, but he's always been an odd one out. He slipped the crowd and hid in a classroom. Somebody had to go and find him..."

You trail off. The last time you saw the Academy, it was collapsing around you. Who knows what became of everyone there?

You find yourself surprisingly indifferent. It doesn't really matter, does it? You can think about it when you're not an imminent corpse on legs. Nothing to do but stay calm.

"You risked your life to save him," said Wyll, "That's commendable."

"It was my job."

Wyll smiles. "And here I thought all the bards at the Unrolling Scroll were at least two hundred years old."

You decide not to comment on your status as bard. "Most of them are elderly, alright. The senior staff are mostly ex-scribes from Candlekeep."

Which is impressive. Most scholars are middle-aged by the time they get to enter Candlekeep at all, and most die of old age before they finish their to-do list there. The great library-city holds most of the Sword Coast's books and a sizable number of its magical artefacts, most of which it obtains as entrance fees from aspiring scholars. Candlekeep is occupied by devotees of Oghma, wizards and scribes and knowledge-seekers, along with the more bookish kinds of bards.

You've never seen a young Candlekeep monk. You're *pretty* sure children are legally banned in Candlekeep. In order to retire from Candlekeep, you'd want to be at least ninety years old.

"Are you from Candlekeep?" Wyll asks. "I've always wanted to know what it's like inside."

"No, no. My mother had a few friends from the College of Lore that went to Candlekeep, though."

"Barding runs in the family, then."

"She was quite talented, in her time," you tell Wyll, "She raised us to do bardic magic at about the same age we learned to read and write. The techniques you saw me use were ones she taught me as a girl."

"You weren't too young to control your magic?"

"I was," you say, "But I don't think it bothered her. Anyway, my mother was the bard. I'm my own woman. I'm..."

You search for a respectable title.

"...A young professional. With a background in barding."

"You're too modest! You handled yourself well."

"Thank you."

"*Extremely* well." He frowns. "You've never been an adventurer?"

"Not since my mother died. It was... what we did together."

He nods sympathetically. You see his expression grow wistful, and decide to change the topic before he asks you too much about Sunrise Tavernsong.

"Whereas you're an Adventurer, with a capital A," you remark, "I'm sure I've heard the kids talk about you."

"Really? That's gratifying to hear."

"Probably none of it true. They invent a lot of stories. Do you ride a unicorn that shoots lasers?"

Wyll chuckles. "Well, it would have made escaping the Nautiloid a little easier, I'm sure."

"It would've been nice if the Nautiloid had warped to the Celestial Plane instead of the hells."

"It would have," Wyll agrees, "I travelled to the Nine Hells to hunt demons, not be hunted by Mind Flayers. I was on the cusp of finishing my mission, too."

You study Wyll for a moment. He was good on the Nautiloid, certainly, but not good enough that he could just hop over to the Infernal Plane. That kind of magic, to your knowledge, is reserved for the kinds of mages who can level cities. Yet...

...Come think of it, Gale was doing exactly that, before he vanished into the wall.

Who *were* these people before you met them?

"What was your mission?" you ask.

"Tracking down one of Zariel's right-hand warriors." Wyll cracks his knuckles. "A heartless devil by the name of Karlach."

"Who do you work for?"

The question seems to throw Wyll for a moment. "I hunt down any devil who threatens the Gate and its surrounds. Everything I do, I do for the people of the Sword Coast," he says.

That's an oddly specific answer. You try another question. "Are you self-employed?"

This one seems to genuinely baffle him.

"...Yes," he says eventually, "Well, no. Definitely not. Except, yes. Sort of. It is *far* too complicated to explain—"

Footsteps from the woods.

You recognise the sound immediately. You've heard the same footfalls a dozen times a year working at the Academy, with your little office next to the dormitories. The beach you're walking down is rocky, and littered with dried seaweed and nautiloid-bits. Small footsteps, moving in a group, trying not to be caught but lacking the grace to pull it off. You've been sticking to the beach because of the underbrush, but it's the kind of underbrush that could very easily hide a person. Or a dozen.

You raise your hand to silence Wyll, and he goes quiet.

"Ye can come out!" You call. "You're not fooling anyone anyway."

The stern voice comes extremely easily to you. The risk of professionally working with children is that any time you encounter children in the wild, you instinctively assume you're in charge of them.

The quiet that follows is very skillful. But eventually one of the kids folds, and emerges from his hiding place in the bushes. another pulls him back, and they scuffle, revealing a third. Eventually they all troop out onto the beach to join you. Five kids of indiscriminate gender, all tieflings, none of them older than thirteen. They're clearly not related. their horns are all different shapes, and all of them have different but undoubtedly infernal skin colours.

They don't look well-fed. They have the thin, underdeveloped look of the city urchins from home, kids who fall between the cracks and end up running messages for the Guild. They're out-of-place here, seemingly in the middle of nowhere.

You cross your arms, and Wyll mimics you.

"You aren't supposed to be here," says one of the kids.

"This is *private property*," says another.

"Did you fall from the big ship?" asks the third.

The fourth silences their questions with an authoritative look.

She's clearly in charge. She looks like she might be a year or two older than the rest, making her the natural leader. she squares up to you with snide, delinquent confidence, daring you to challenge her. Her skin is a striking red, and just one glowing eye looks out at you, the other covered by a dirty bandage slung around her head with such carelessness that she obviously did it herself.

"What we *ought* to do," she says slowly, looking you up and down, "Is tell Archdruid Kagma you were invading the Grove, and then you'll be *dead*."

That doesn't sound fantastic. You glance at Wyll.

"Archdruid Kagma?" says Wyll. "Are we near a druid's enclave?"

The kids clearly aren't druids. The fact they're here, threatening you with an archdruid, is very interesting in addition to being very ominous.

The ringleader grins viciously.

"This *is* a druid's enclave," she says, "You're trespassing. How'd you get here?"

You exchange looks. "It's a long story," says Wyll.

"We've got time," says the ringleader.

"*We* don't, I'm afraid," says Wyll, "But we need your help..."

Wyll doesn't even finish the sentence before a look of mercurial greed appears on the girl's face.

"*Do ya?*" She says, grinning like a shark smelling blood.

You wonder if Wyll spends enough time in the city to know this particular routine. He does. he reaches into a pocket, produces a silver piece, and flicks it towards the girl with ease – with deliberate coolness, you note. The younger ones are already looking at his sword with starry eyes. No doubt even the most hard-hearted kid would end up trying to impress him, given a tenday.

The girl examines the coin before pocketing it. Unlike the other children, she's clearly adult-smart enough to hide her excitement over you two.

"We need to know exactly where we are," says Wyll, "And if there's someone in charge we can speak to. Maybe someone who can help us out with supplies and shelter."

She puts her hands in her pockets.

"You're smack dab in the middle of the Grove. It belongs to the Emerald Enclave," she says. "It's sealed off to outsiders. They opened up to let us stay. We walked here from Elturel."

"Alone?" asks Wyll.

"A bunch of us. Old Hellrider Zevlor said he'd guard us."

"He cut off a goblin's head," cuts in one of the smaller kids, in a tone of urgent importance, "With his sword."

"Shut up, Mirkon," snaps another one.

Refugees, then. tieflings fleeing both the poverty and the prejudice that wracked the city after it was almost destroyed. The Descent into Avernus, which is the catchy name the *Gazette* gave it when Elturel sank into the Hells, created plenty of orphans. These kids are probably among them. The sojourn into hell also prejudiced the city against anyone with horns and a pointy tail, resulting in a spate of attacks that, in all likelihood, killed as many parents as the Descent did. There is nowhere on the Sword Coast it's easy to be a tiefling, but Elturel is murder for them, now.

"They let us in here 'cos goblins killed all our scouts except Cerys," says Mol, "And Halsin – he used to be in charge before Kagha – said we could stay until the road to Baldur's Gate was free."

The road to Baldur's Gate. Against all odds, it seems, you aren't that far from home. The thought makes your stomach uneasy.

"Which road were you taking?" says Wyll.

"The high road to the North. Then straight along the Chionthar until Baldur's Gate. About a tenday."

Wyll nods. You mentally place yourself somewhere between Elturel and Baldur's Gate.

"Course, you two being *outsiders*, it doesn't seem likely the druids will wanna help you. They won't even let you talk to 'em without a reason." She crosses her arms. "Or without the right *introduction* and all."

"Mol, we're not *allowed* in the Inner Sanctum," protests one of the other kids.

Mol shrugs. "We're allowed to *escort* people to it," she says, "That's decent, above-board work, that."

"Kagha said if she caught you sneaking around again," says one boy cheerfully, earning a glower from Mol. "She'd turn your eyeballs into thorns. Remember?"

Mol snarls, "I don't know, Mattis, do *you* remember how I said I'd turn you inside-out you next time you said something stupid while we're working?"

"I'm certain," interrupts Wyll, "That no druid will grow thorns in your eyes while the Blade of Frontiers has anything to say about it. Take us to Kagha. *Please*."

Mol and her friend seem to forget their disagreement. "Pony up, mate," says Mattis, "*Please*."

Wyll sticks his hand back into his pocket and comes out with another five silver pieces. This time Mol counts them, like a market stall owner. Satisfied, she tosses her head, indicating for the two of you to follow her, and begins to lead you away from the beach.

A small worn path is beaten into the undergrowth. you and Wyll pick your way through the thorns and grasses, while the kids tear through like it's nothing. They seem at home here, for refugees.

Mol maintains a professional silence, but the other kids aren't nearly so patient. They tail you eagerly, their eyes bright and excited at the sight of 'real adventurers'.

"Did you really fall from the sky?" says Mattis.

"Were there monsters?" asks a painfully thin and hungry-looking girl, who introduces herself as Silfy.

"Can you do magic?" Mirkon, the smallest, asks.

The fifth child, who Mattis tells you is called Doni, never speaks – he's probably nonverbal. His eyes wander, and he fidgets, blank-faced, while the others talk.

It occurs to you, as Wyll earnestly starts answering their questions, that telling everyone you meet that you were infected by mind flayers is probably not going to win you any friends. You also don't think these five children, who are already orphans and refugees, need the information that you and Wyll are about to turn grey and drop dead. They have enough problems.

"Do you have no idea who you're talking to?" you tell the kids. "He's Wyll, the Blade of Frontiers."

That gets their attention. The chattier kids light up. Mol stops and folds her arms, making sure it's obvious she's not that interested.

"A devil hunter. He follows evil all over the Sword Coast, and chases monsters through the Hells." You speak matter-of-factly, as though this information isn't mostly new to you, and it has the intended effect of making the kids go wide-eyed with awe. Even Doni looks excited. "We fell here after our portal back from Avernus didn't work as planned."

"We escaped from Avernus too!" says Mirkon, tugging Wyll's sleeve.

Wyll's face softens. "You must have been very brave."

"It was—"

"It was *fine*," Mol interjects, rolling her good eye.

Silfy asks you, almost as an afterthought, "What do *you* do?"

Your answer is instinctive. "I'm the witness to Wyll's feats of heroism," you say, "A chronicler of tales. A bard who – ah."

You attempt to show the children your lute, only to find the case on your back is empty. You forgot it was destroyed by a dragon. Hopefully Jerryl's parents didn't pay too much for it.

"Cheer up," grins Mattis, "If I find one, I'll sell it to you."

Underfoot, the sand turns to gravel and soil. It takes less walking than you expected to reach a wide path away from the beach, and then along a little gravel path. The sounds of livestock and chatter float through the air.

And, when you start to hum a tune and open up your senses, there's a distinct feel to the air's magic. As you follow the kids, the echo of the Weave is fast and erratic, thrumming with an animalistic fury. The grass underfoot grows a bit too green to be entirely natural.

Eventually you emerge out into what the kids called The Hollow, a little settlement that sits in the crook next to a sheer cliff. 'Settlement' is generous, maybe; the only dwellings are tents and rough cobbled-together huts, barrels and trunks sitting under dirty canvas in corners. There must be about thirty or forty refugees here, all tieflings from the Elturel, from the looks of it. They give you curious looks as you pass by, but nobody stops you. You're almost reassured that Kagha won't murder you on sight.

"That's the front gate?" Wyll points. The large wooden gate is supported by wooden ramparts and patrolled by tieflings in slapdash scraps of armour – clearly not soldiers, just survivors.

"Only way in or out," says Mol, "Unless you fall out of the sky and smack right into the middle of the grove."

"Why the guards?" you ask.

There's tension in the air here, a drawn unhappy look to people's faces, and the armed tieflings patrolling the gate look the most uncomfortable out of everyone.

Mol's lip curls. "Goblins, like I told you. They're still around. They won't let us leave."

"Kagha says they're going to come and kill us all," says Mirkon quietly.

"The more I hear about this Kagha..." begins Wyll. He shakes his head. "I suppose we have no choice but to be polite to her, do we?"

"Feel free to tell her where to stick it," says Mol, "I'd like to see that. Course, you probably wouldn't survive."

You hope you can handle Kagha. She can't be any worse than the parents at the academy, can she? Kagha, at the very least, is a druid, which takes more hard work than being born rich.

You pass through the refugees' campsite and begin to approach a stone circle, and the sound of druidic magic in the air begins to swell. You hear chanting and take a moment to realise that it's a real sound; in the centre of the circle are druids, four of them at equidistant points, chanting in unison. Their words ebb and flow with the Weave, and you get a sense of something gestating, like a seed about to sprout.

"What are they doing?" you ask Mol.

She shrugs. "Beats me. Druid stuff. Ask Kagha, if you like."

The kids fall silent as they approach the entrance to the stone circle. You've never seen a real druid's circle before, but this one certainly matches every book you've read about them; druidic runes are carved into each standing stone and into the paving-tiles of the floor, which are overgrown and cracked with grasses and flowers. A stone passageway, overgrown with moss, is set into a dirt wall that borders the circle on one side. Around a stone monument in the centre are the four chanting druids, who don't even glance in your direction.

The entrance to the circle is guarded by two druids, who look extremely pissed off to see you.

"Hello?" you say.

The kids have practically evaporated. Mol jerks a thumb at you two, says "Adventurers," and immediately scarpers – apparently, that's as much contact as she's willing to risk with the druids.

One of the druid guards – a human with beautiful dreadlocks in every shade of autumn leaf – tosses her head in contempt. "We have no more room for outsiders," she says stiffly, "If you've come to beg us for our resources, we have none to give."

The other druid – a dwarf with druidic tattoos marking his extremely muscular forearms – grunts.

So much tension and hostility packed into a little druid grove in the middle of nowhere. You sense Wyll's restlessness next to you, the fingers of his rapier-hand twitching.

"We've come to offer you our services," you say, mind racing, "It sounds like you have a goblin problem."

This doesn't seem to move either of the guards. The human guard rolls her eyes. "What we have is a *tiefling* problem," she growls. (With your tadpole, you feel a wave of anger rolling off Wyll's shoulders.)

"We're adventurers," you tell her, "We deal with all kinds of problems."

"That's what the last adventurer said." She narrows her eyes. "He has done nothing but take up space and ask inane questions."

Excellent. Those are the two things you were hoping to do too. "Maybe we could have a word with him," you say. "Hurry him along."

She gives you a withering look. You suspect she cares more about making her feelings known than stopping you from entering, though, and she eventually shrugs and steps aside. "Fine," she says, waving you in, "Make your business quick."

The dwarf waits for a few seconds of menacing silence before he steps aside too.

You're watched by a mixture of druids and animals, although it's impossible to tell the two apart for certain. A half-elf points towards the little stone passageway, and you step into the darkness, the air growing cool as you walk down a stairway and into an underground chamber.

This, presumably, is the inner sanctum that Mol was forbidden from entering. The sound of rushing water bounces off the murals on the walls. an altar to Silvanus sits at the centre of the room, bright with candlelight and littered with animal bones. Kneeling at the altar is, surely, Kagha. Who else would be praying with such open, radiating malice?

At her side is another druid, an older human who sits lazily on a stone, making no effort to appear either pious or frightening. He wears a helmet with a deer's horns fixed to the front, almost giving him the appearance of a prong-horned devil.

"What is it, Rath?" says Kagha, eyes closed in prayer. She hasn't even looked up.

"Visitors," Rath says, "Again."

His voice is deep and stern, in contrast to the rather frail look in his eyes. He looks tired. He looks bone-deep *exhausted*, in fact.

Kagha makes you wait before she stands up to speak to you. Of course she does.

"Are you one of Aradin's crew?" she demands. "Is there word of Halsin?"

That's an interesting way to start a conversation. "No, Archdruid," you say, because, as your Da would say, it never hurts to kiss the bossman's arse. "We're here to help with the tieflings."

Kagha likes that. she relaxes slightly, as though she was worried you were bringing bad news. "Good. Maybe with mercenary support, the devilkin will finally concede to leaving when they have *long* overstayed their welcome."

Rath begins, "Halsin—"

"Is *absent*!" Kagha's composure slips with razor swiftness. "I am the acting archdruid, and I cannot stand by and do *nothing* while our supplies dwindle and the window for the Rite of Thorns passes by!"

Kagha's eyes blaze as she tears into her subordinate. Rath, for his part, doesn't even flinch. He holds Kagha's gaze for a long, even moment.

You glance up at Wyll. He glances down at you. You share wide eyes and furrowed eyebrows: *What is going on with this place?*

The moment passes. Neither of the druids acknowledge the exchange.

"Talk to Zevlor," continues Kagha, "It's time we began making plans to remove these refugees from the grove, and he cannot use Halsin's absence as an excuse forever. Tell him that their egress starts *now*. Guard their caravan, kill their goblins, whatever he tells you. Just don't expect any kind of payment until those damn devils are *on the road*."

Kagha is tall even for an elf, her sharp features drawn into what seems to be an expression of perpetual sourness. Her red hair is scraped into a severe bun, and she looks down at you from the top of an icy glare. She's about three feet taller than you are, and she looks at you in a way that makes you feel very, very kickable.

"Talk to Rath if you have questions," she says. "Rath?"

He leaves his response just a beat too long, making it clear he could choose not to obey if he wanted to. "Yes, Archdruid."

A trio of rats skitter across the floor. One of them turns to look at you, and its beady eyes glitter with malevolence.

—No, no. Rats don't have eyes that *glitter* with anything. The tension in the room must be putting you on edge.

"I suppose you'd better come with me," says Rath.

The chamber isn't that dark or cold, but it's a visceral relief to step outside and back into the sunlight, all the same. The inner sanctum gives you an odd chill, like something is constantly staring at you.

"Interesting woman," says Wyll neutrally.

Rath grunts. "The grove is in a difficult position," he says, "She's right. Our generosity cannot last forever, and the refugees need to reach Baldur's Gate."

"Indeed," says Wyll, "But we aren't talking about *forever* here, are we?"

"Hm," says Rath, and no more.

Experimentally, you reach out for Wyll's connection in your mind and poke it. He raises an eyebrow at you.

"Rath," you say, "Is there anywhere we could set up camp for a day or two?"

"Most of our space is taken by the refugees," he says, "But there's a spot by the river, if you don't mind the distance. Adventurers used to stay there often."

The other druids go quiet around Rath, and watch him with just a little too much attention. You suspect Rath will be more talkative in private, away from the hostility of his peers.

Wyll either reads your mind or guesses correctly, because he says, "Can you take us there?"

Fortunately, Rath leads you the way you came, out of earshot of the druids. You spot Mattis and another, new child sitting in the grass in the Hollow, and they wave when they see you. "Come again!" hollers Mattis. "You won't find better customer service anywhere!"

Rath shakes his head. "You paid them?"

"Should I not have?" asks Wyll.

"No, I'm impressed. They don't usually ask before they take coin."

He turns away from the hubbub of the Hollow, guiding you back along the path near the beach.

"I should introduce myself properly," he says. "I am Rath, servant of the Oak Father and encircled of the Moon."

A bard must always make the introductions, whispers your mother.

"I am Evening Tavernsong, daughter of— of Baldur's Gate." Not quite right, but better. "My companion is Wyll, Blade of Frontiers, and a guardian of the Sword Coast against evil."

You worry Wyll might find this description corny, but he smiles.

"That's fortunate," says Rath dryly. "Evil so easily finds us these days."

He leads you uphill, following a small stream that babbles towards the beach. It's a steep climb. too strenuous for an old person or child, but reasonable enough for an adventurer-bodied adult. The grove seems to vanish as soon as you look away. the trees and hills swallow it instantly.

Rath seems to relax as he walks away from the grove, just as you predicted. The refugees occasionally wave as he passes, and he waves back. Unlike Kagha, he radiates the sort of serene wisdom you imagine a druid ought to have. He also has the outdoorsiness. He's barefoot and must be at least sixty, but he climbs the slopes as gracefully as a goat.

"You'll have to excuse Kagha," says Rath, when there's a safe, empty, five-minute walk between him and the nearest druid. "She's an excellent druid, but leadership is new to her."

You and Wyll swap glances.

"Things seem tense here," you say, "Everyone seems to be worried."

"True, and with good reason," says Rath gloomily. "Kagha is right about one thing; the grove does not have room for the refugees to stay here indefinitely – our supplies have been dwindling rapidly since their arrival. They must leave eventually, or starve."

"*Eventually*, yes," says Wyll, "But Kagha implied that she wanted them gone by... well, as soon as possible, it seems."

Rath sighs. "Druids are not easily inclined to share," he says, "Many are drawn to our ways precisely *because* they struggle to cohabitate with people. They come to nature to escape the harshness of poverty and warfare, not have it dragged on their doorstep."

"*Nobody* wants to deal with poverty or warfare," says Wyll, "But the burden can be lessened, if shared. Surely the Oak Father—"

"Mind your tongue," says Rath. "The other druids may not be pleased to hear an outsider's views on the Oak Father's teachings."

He doesn't seem offended, but the warning in his words is clear. *Don't go blabbing like that. People won't like it.*

"The issue is that the roads are overrun by goblins, then," you say. "If we were to stay here and contribute to the fighting, they'd probably get discouraged eventually. Right?"

Hiring adventurers to deal with goblins is practically standard fare in the countryside. You can remember it happening countless times while growing up in Friendly Arm. Goblin problems usually can be traced down to one bossy goblin getting notions about 'turf', and peter out after 5-10 goblins are killed, because goblin political movements tend to cap out at about 5-10 participants.

"The goblins don't usually cause an issue," says Rath, "Their camp has always been close. It's just west, near the border. But now, their attacks are... regular. Coordinated. They act like a true army. It's vexing."

You reach the designated campsite, which sits in a surprisingly sheltered bit of cliff. It's a nice little spot, quiet and next to the river, but the signs of occupation are still scattered around. a single tent is tucked away next to a boulder, probably belonging to the other adventurer the druids mentioned. Poles and sheets of canvas lie folded neatly next to battered crates nearby; supplies left over from the last mercenary band here, perhaps.

"Did something happen?" you ask. "Anything that might aggravate the goblins?"

"I know very little of their affairs. We try to ignore them, and to my knowledge, they try to ignore us in return. I don't know what they might want with the grove, but it can't be nothing."

Not with the aggression they've been targeting us with." Rath shakes his head. "Kagha is right to be concerned. If not dissuaded, they could pose a real threat to the druids living here."

"They're already posing a threat to the refugees living here," Wyll points out, "The children told us one of their scouts was shot."

Rath winces. "More than one. They target the refugees with vengeance. Halsin felt it was our duty to safeguard them from their enemies."

"But not everyone agrees," says Wyll.

"Hmph." Rath doesn't seem comfortable replying. You catch another glimpse of the exhaustion in his eyes. "Most do. But those who do not hold a lot of power over the grove."

"Tale as old as time," mutters Wyll.

"Neither I nor Kagha are politicians by nature. Halsin was the one who could manage disputes like this. You're adventurers, aren't you? I know Kagha asked you to... well..."

Wyll waves a hand. "Pressure the refugees into leaving?"

"If she wanted them dead, she could have forced them out the moment Halsin left." There's a note of annoyance in his voice. Rath, you imagine, has been defending Kagha to half the grove and the refugees to the other half. "She has been placed in a difficult situation. We *all* have."

Not as difficult as the one the refugees are in, you think. If you kick them out, they'll die.

"Not as difficult as the one the refugees are in," says Wyll, out loud. He's reading your thoughts again. You shoot him a glare. "If you kick them out, they'll die."

Rath sighs harshly.

"The refugees need your help. Kagha needs your help. And, Oak Father forgive me, but a third desperate fool also begs you for your assistance. Wyll, Evening Tavernsong – if you are truly heroes of the Sword Coast, find Halsin and bring him home. I see no other way for this situation to end without bloodshed."

Words spoken softly and without much hope. Rath seems stressed. It seems more than the words *bring Halsin home* were bubbling under the surface well before you arrived.

"Upon my honour," says Wyll, "We'll do everything we can to help."

"We can begin by pinpointing the issue with the goblins," you begin.

Now, hold on a minute.

"Rath," you say, "Does the grove have a healer? A good one?"

Rath blinks in surprise. "What for?"

"A friend of ours has an unusual medical problem," you say, tactfully avoiding the statement *Mind flayer babies are eating our brains*. "Beyond the scope of most healers."

"I see. Regrettably, our best healer would probably be Halsin..." Of course it would. "But his assistant Nettie may be able to help. Her magic is weak, but her knowledge of medicines is formidable. She's in his laboratory, in the Inner Sanctum."

"Thank you," you say. "And Kevlor? Kagha mentioned him."

"The leader of the refugees. He'll be managing the patrols by the gate."

You nod.

"I had best take my leave," says Rath, "Thank you for caring. You seem like good folk. Good luck to you, whatever it is you truly came here for."

Ah. Perceptive old geezer.

"You have our thanks," says Wyll, "We'll set up camp here and head back to the Hollow as soon as we can."

Rath chooses to leave in style. with a series of snapping and popping sounds, he transforms into a falcon.

The falcon gives you one last appraising look before flying away.

Wyll takes off his gambeson, leaving the armour on a rock, and rolls his arms. He sighs. *Good, you think. He's earned a sigh. God knows I have.*

"We picked an odd place to crash," he says, "But it seems like we have a place to stay and an excuse to poke about. Things could be worse."

"Mind flayers could hatch out of our skulls," you suggest.

"Yes, you've mentioned. It's on your mind pretty often."

"I told you not to be poking around in my thoughts."

"I can't help it," he says apologetically, "You're a very loud thinker."

You and Wyll examine the supplies, which are apparently enough to erect at least a few tents. You have no idea how to transform a pile of dirty logs, pegs, ropes, and canvas sheets into a functional dwelling, but Wyll assures you that it's possible.

"Here, I'll set you one up next to mine," he says. "It's the least I can do. You had Kaga and the guards eating out of the palm of your hand."

"I'm the matron of a private academy for children," you tell him, "Kaga and the druids act like entitled parents. I'm in my element."

Wyll is silent for a moment. The act of building a tent seems practically effortless to him; you can imagine he's been doing it regularly for years at this point. He barely needs to pause and think. He simply starts hammering pegs and poles into the ground like it's nothing.

"Forgive me for being small-minded, but..." Wyll glances up from his work to glance in your direction. "I assumed you were a scholar or teacher of some kind, being a bard who works at the Unrolling Scroll. You're the matron?"

"My mother was a bard," you remind him. "Evening Tavernsong, Daughter of Sunrise Tavernsong – that's just the way she taught me to introduce myself when we were adventuring. She was that sort of woman. She thought it was adorable."

Wyll says, quietly, "That *is* adorable."

"I've been remembering her lessons all day. I haven't done this in years."

"Were you close?" he asks.

You mull that one over. "When I was young, yes. We... lost touch later."

"I know that one all too well," says Wyll. "My father and I were – are – the same."

He's stopped building the tent. He looks pensive.

"How do you mean?" you ask.

"Close when I was young, distant later on. But I'm grateful for the childhood he gave me. His father had been a very cold man all his life, apparently."

You recite,

"The apple went a separate path / Once harvest time begun.

No more can Trees the Cider change / Than Father change his son.

I think that's from Volo. Mum loved him. For some reason."

Wyll chuckles. "You don't?"

"I worship Oghma enough to work at the Unrolling Scroll, you know. I'm very literate." You nod. "I hear some of his books are so shit they're banned outside the walls of Candlekeep."

Wyll laughs.

"You're a wonderful person to be stuck with, you know," he tells you, "I bet the kids at the Unrolling Scroll just adore you."

Effortlessly charming flattery. You snort. "You know, I have a brother who talks *exactly* like you."

Wyll seems to realise for the first time he's stopped building the tent. He hurriedly gets back to hammering pegs. Maybe they're not so similar. Noonan would never have offered to put up a tent for you.

In an attempt to look useful, you open the crates and find them full of dusty camping supplies – bedrolls, cookware, moth-eaten blankets, bottles of mysterious liquid. Inside a dusty jar, you find enough dried Rogue's Morsels to make a few healing potions and decide to take them. You can't afford to be picky.

"I bet you're the older sister," Wyll says.

"I am. How did you know?"

"Just a hunch."

You open up the leather case that once contained Jerryll's lute. It must have functioned as an effective backpack as well as a lute-case, and there are pencils and bits of chalk stored in various pockets. you open the largest pocket and find it full of papers and notebooks. It seems like you accidentally stole a chunk of Jerryll's schoolwork, as well.

Eh. You almost died trying to save him. If he's still alive, he can cope. You stash away the morsels and find a loose piece of paper, softened and yellowed with age, tucked into a leather flap.

"What's that?" says Wyll.

"It was in Jerryll's case." You examine it. "It looks like an old letter. Odd. Is it a family thing?"

You sit on top of the crates and squint at the faded ink, leaving Wyll to finish setting up his tents in silence.

Heya,

It's me, Imoen. I don't know if I'll ever be able to send you this letter. But I wish you were here, and writing to you is almost as good. I've been thinking a lot about when we were kids. Life was a lot simpler then.

I'm holding it together. I try to imagine myself somewhere else. Like back home in Candlekeep. Helping clean the rooms at Winthrop's and picking pockets. Remember when I was eleven and we broke into Gorion's study? That was the first time I ever broke into his study. Boy, I sure did love breaking into that study. I swear he was prouder of me every time I foiled him, deep down in his wrinkly old heart.

He was prouder of you though. I miss that old son of a bun. I wish I could tell him about our adventures. I wish I could see the look on his face when he hears about all the locks I picked. He'd be happy I was looking out for you. "Imoen, keep my ward out of trouble," he'd say.

Gosh, I really miss those days. I'm tired. I don't know if I've slept at all. I must be sleeping, though. The dreams are awful. Sometimes, even when I'm awake, I can hear Bhaal's voice. The worst part is when he's nice to me. Makes my skin crawl.

Creep keeps asking me about you. He says you're not coming, that you were killed in Athkatla. He wants to know what makes you dangerous and what your weaknesses are. Don't worry, I won't tell him anything embarrassing about you. And you don't have any weaknesses.

I saw you in one of my nightmares the other day. You were transforming into this monster with sharp claws, something animal and angry and vicious. But, heck, I was so glad to see you again, I didn't even care. You were a monster but you were still looking out for me. I could just feel it.

I'll be waiting. I know when you get here, you'll have some important and dangerous mission you're on, so I'll keep my mind sharp and my blade close, don't worry. He won't break me. I won't let him. We're gonna get through this whole thing together, like I told you at the start.

I think I hear him coming. Maybe I should stop

The letter ends mid-scrawl.

"What does it say?" says Wyll.

"It's an old letter for someone who grew up in Candlekeep. He must have taken it from one of the monks." You scan the words again, frowning. "Why would he have done that?"

"Mischief?"

"He doesn't seem the type. He's a very anxious boy." But then again, children are unpredictable. Jerryl is (was?) prone to lashing out, too.

Either way, the letter, seemingly written by a kidnapping victim who was hearing the voice of Bhaal, is not exactly child-appropriate literature. The paper's far too old for 'Imoen' to be in clear danger anymore, if she's even still alive. You don't remember anyone at the Academy mentioning the name.

You scan the letter again. A date? A location?

No. Just those words in faded ink, and a name: *Imoen*.

Why the hell did Jerryl have this?

"There," announces Wyll.

You look up and see two pretty comfortably-sized tents where there was once a pile of logs and fabric. The man is a true magician.

"We can rest here for a bit, if you need," says Wyll, but he's clearly asking for your benefit. He looks as fresh-faced as anything, for a man who recently woke up conked on the beach.

"No, I'm fine." You stuff the letter with the rest of the papers and pack away the mushrooms in another compartment. You seal up the case and hoist it onto your back. "We have work to do."

"Indeed."

You push the odd letter to the back of your mind and follow Wyll back to the Hollow.

Chapter 4

To your surprise, the refugees accept you almost instantly. There was a time that the Grove was a hub for passing travellers, apparently – although the whole area used to be a lot safer. It's not the first time the druids have swapped favours for shelter with adventurers.

"The goblins will ravage anyone out there scouting or collecting supplies – the only way to stay safe is keeping someone dangerous around. And to be honest, it's only three proper adventurers. The fourth one never does anything." Danis laughs. "He says he's an author, and sure enough, I've never seen him do anything except take notes."

"He interviewed me, but I'm sure he was just making up things in his notes." Bex laughs along with her husband. "Why did he come out here? He could've just stayed at home and done it there."

Bex and Danis have taken it on themselves to show you around and introduce you to everyone, because apparently being trapped inside the grove with nowhere safe to go has been stiflingly boring. They're a young couple, newly married, hoping Baldur's Gate will give them more than the destitution of Elturel promised.

"That's if we ever get out of this damn place," says Danis. He shrugs. "Are you hungry?"

They both share a sort of gallows cheeriness. In that way, their situation reminds you very much of yours.

A lady named Okta cooks and serves the meals from a constantly-busy mess area, and she hands each of you a bowl of hot pottage, which you eat sitting on dusty crates. You don't realise how hungry you are until you taste a spoonful of unseasoned grain and leeks and find yourself ravenous. It's the kind of stew that's been cooking for at least a week, forming the last bastion between the refugees and starvation – food supplies are, of course, precarious here. Okta makes it clear with grandmotherly insistence that she won't accept you refusing the food.

Bex and Danis pepper you with questions about the city – questions you're surprised to find Wyll can't answer.

"You must know Sharess' Caress," you say, "The famous brothel? It's in the Gazette every other week. People are always writing letters about it."

"I don't pay much mind to the gossip pages." Wyll shrugs. "I have no context for most of it, anyway. I haven't been back in years."

"But you've never been!" Bex sighs dramatically. "I'll have to see it for myself. I'm going to make friends with a load of gossip women and insist we all go on a night out there."

"And not invite me, eh?" Danis nudges her.

The kids reappear, back to hollering and messing about now that there's no druids around. Okta gives them scraps of hard bread to eat with their pottage, and they all clearly adore her – even Mol lets Okta pet her hair.

Plans for Baldur's Gate are a common conversational topic in the grove. Okta plans to find work as household staff – she was a maid for years before she married, and went back to housekeeping when her husband died. Mol, of course, plans to be running the Guild by next year.

"Aren't you a bit young to be thinking about embarking on a life of crime?" says Wyll.

"Aren't you a bit young to be sticking your nose in my business?" Mol retorts. Her cronies cackle, and Wyll goodnaturedly rolls his eyes.

Okta takes away the bowls. The food is good, but there's not enough of it. Even if you did nothing else, you and Wyll hunting game would be a considerable boon to the grove's supplies.

The kids tail you as Danis and Bex show you a supply tent, where a long-suffering young blacksmith is making tools under the druid's insistence that he not make anything new out of metal while staying in the grove. "Zariel drafted me to be an engineer in the Hells," he complains, "Without the ability to create new tools, I'm just a tinkerer. Let me know if you need a wooden mallet, I suppose."

You've never seen so many tieflings in one place. they're a rare sight in the Upper City. One of your coworkers was a tiefling, one of the Avowed wizards who would stop in teach a yearly Introduction to Arcane Artificery, and every year at least one of the children would say *something* – ask her about her horns or why she was purple – and leave you mortified. She always told you she'd had worse.

"Have you met the other adventurers?" the blacksmith suggests. "They'll be patrolling the ramparts."

Bex and Danis point you towards the ramparts, but they insist on staying back with the kids – apparently they've snuck up there more than once and messed about the weapons and fuel, antics that drive Zevlor up the wall. The adventurer's aren't hard to locate, even without help. their names are Lia, Cal, and Rolan, and they report that they, too, have failed to figure out what the hell is going on with the goblins or Kagma.

"Gods, she's such a bitch!" Lia throws up her hands in frustration. "She calls us *hellspawn*. She's always making these catty little comments about nature and blood, reminding us how much better than us she thinks she is! Augh! It makes me want to hit something!"

"Good luck," Cal tells you, "You'll need it out there. We're leaving first thing tomorrow."

Rolan shakes his head. "They're a rough crowd here."

"They've had a hard time," Cal says reproachfully. He looks over at you. "You'll look after them with us gone, yeah? Until the goblins are sorted out?"

"That's the plan," says Wyll.

All three of them are tieflings like the refugees, and they felt it was their duty to check in with the refugees when they saw the state of them. Halsin let them stay, but Kagha made it pretty clear she they had three choices: kicking out the refugees, exterminating the goblins, or fucking right off.

"And obviously we weren't going to send them out there to their deaths," shrugs Lia. "The refugees invited us in and let us stay with them."

"It was a bit of a charity act stopping here in the first place," remarks Rolan. "We're not really adventurers, you know. I have an apprenticeship in the city with a wizard named Lorroakan and I really can't be late. It's at a very prestigious magic shop called—"

"They don't care about your apprenticeship, Rolan," Lia sighs. Rolan puffs up with outrage.

"Zevlor's got his tent pitched in the Hollow, down near the supply tents," says Cal, pointing past them and into the grove. "That little chapel thing is what passes for his office."

You follow his directions and end up in another small stone chamber, this one lit by sunlight pouring in from a collapsed ceiling. An old tiefling in battered armour awaits you there, undoubtedly Zevlor himself.

"Come in," he murmurs, waving at nothing.

Zevlor's 'office' consists of a scattering of papers and gold coins across a stone tablet that has been repurposed into an uncomfortable desk. The large armoured man who must be Zevlor stares at the papers and drums his nails, barely glancing up as you enter. His eyes, as they flit up to glance at you, are a striking yellow.

"Are you with Aradin? Do you have news of Halsin?" he asks.

You shake your head. "Just passers-by, sorry."

"Well, if Kagha sent you to hurry us along, tell her I'm trying. If we can just eke out our supplies for three more weeks, we might catch one of the Fist's supply wagons when they start reassigning troops..." He sighs. "Still, it's good to have more able-bodied hands, what with the goblins about. I was worried what we'd do without Lia and her brothers."

"What can we do?" asks Wyll.

Zevlor looks up properly for the first time, as though surprised you were listening. He's a tall, wiry man, ruby-skinned with a pair of magnificent black horns curling back along his skull. His long, angular face is made longer by the devilish ridges and grooves that score his cheekbones and brow line. Even with some distance between you, he towers over you like an obelisk. If you thought Rath looked tired, this guy really takes the cake. He looks like he's on a new plane of exhaustion.

"Helping us survive would be welcome," he says bluntly. "We live under siege. There's a lot of work to be done here for two more pairs of hands. I was thinking someone with a bit of experience ought to train the children in some basic combat drills. I hate to think of it, but it would be prudent for them to be armed and taught what to do if the goblins breach the walls."

He inhales deeply, as though about to sigh, and freezes. His frazzled, stressed demeanour is suddenly replaced with a stiff guarded anxiety.

"...Something is very wrong with you two," he says. "I can sense it."

Only then it clicks. He's wearing the equipment of the once-proud Hellriders – he's bound to have a measure of divine magic, either from the tenets of the knights of Elturel or from being forced to fight while the city was in the Hells. A dubious background, but the kind that might give him a measure of holy magic. Can he sense the parasite?

Whatever it is, he never gets the chance to continue. He's interrupted before he can speak. A young woman bursts into the room, panting. "Sir!" she cries. "Kanon's raised the alarm. He says there's goblins!"

Zevlor's concerns are forgotten in an instant. He bounds from his seat, shouting, "You two! With me!" before sprinting from his desk and out of the door.

You look to Wyll to find he's already running, leaving you and your short little legs behind. You scramble after them.

Zevlor doesn't bother drawing his longsword. He simply charges towards the gate and up the ramparts. Wyll summons a spark of magic, which he runs between his fingers as he follows Zevlor. By the time you get to the top of the ramparts, you're panting. Zevlor holds a conversation with a panicking watchman.

"—Just saw them through the trees! I don't know what they're doing, but Halsin wasn't there— and there were goblins—"

Zevlor and the watchman Kanon argue over a battered telescope. Kanon clearly isn't combat-trained; he twists his hands nervously as Zevlor looks back over the landscape.

"Alright." Zevlor straightens up. "Don't open the gate for *anyone* until I say so. You two, stay out of sight – if we can't hold them off then someone needs to take the others and cover their exit. Guards! Positions!"

The tired old man you met earlier is gone. If you hadn't clocked him as a Hellrider earlier, you'd surely have done now. He oozes military command, the kind of steely discipline you only get from many years of experience.

The watchman scrambles back to the ramparts' portcullis wheel, glancing fearfully out at the forest as he draws a bow and arrow. Zevlor remains directly above the portcullis, glaring out. He'll be an obvious target for arrows, even from up here, but he seems unbothered; you spot a glimmer of abjuration in the air around him, the kind of spell a cleric might cast before battle.

You spot three figures sprinting towards the gate, none of them goblins. They don't look in formation – they simply look like they're running away from something.

The central figure, who the sunlight reveals as an armoured human, screams as he runs: "*Open the bloody gate!*"

"Nobody gets in!" shouts Kanon. "Zevlor's orders!"

"They're going to kill us!" bellows the man in armour. "They're right on our tail! Please!"

The watchman touches the wheel. Zevlor makes a gesture: not yet. He raises his voice and leans out over the wall. "Aradin? Where's Halsin?!"

"He's goblin meat for all I know!" roars Aradin. "Quickly! They're right behind us!"

"You *led* them here?!" Zevlor bellows with fury. "There are children here, you fool! What were you thinking?!"

"They're going to kill us! Please! There's no time!"

There's a roar. The three mercenaries freeze.

Lumbering after them on the road is a warg. It's a little bigger than a wolf, and easily twice as ugly. its teeth are jagged and too big for its mouth, leaving with a perpetual drooling snarl. Its face is upsettingly humanlike. its nose and jaw bear a slight resemblance to a goblin, or perhaps a

very unfortunate person. It gives a hungry, bloodthirsty gibber when it sees them and starts to charge. Behind it are shouts, barks of Goblinoid and Undercommon, as the force approaches.

For goblins, it's a pretty big force. It does not fill you with confidence. Goblins fall over each other as a pair of bugbears lumber behind, their huge clubs already bloodied and sticky with many battles. They charge towards the nearest targets, i.e. Aradin, his two friends, and all of you suckers on the gate staring at them.

Kanon stares over the wall, his hands trembling. Zevlor looks between the young man and the mercenaries, and he snarls and curses in Infernal before he shouts, "By Nine Hells. Open the gate!"

Kanon starts to wheel the gate open, opening a sliver of freedom for the mercenaries.

A spot of the woods you thought had been empty explodes with another squad of goblins emerging, one of them a mage. He points a skull-topped staff and screams a command in Goblinoid. Wyll tackles you just before the first volley of arrows comes.

You hear a smattering of bangs and thuds as the arrows embed into the thin wooden barrier that separates you from them, peppering the rampart with arrows. One sails over the wall and pierces right through the heart of the watchman Kanon. He gurgles.

"Gods *damn it!*" roars Zevlor, running to Kanon's side. The wheel, unattended, spins wildly. The portcullis comes slamming down before anyone trapped outside can get to the safety of the grove.

Rath was right. This is practically a military operation. Why are there so many goblins? Who gave them *positions*? Who sold them arrows this *well-made*? These aren't goblin tactics. Goblins fight and strategise like drunks – loudly and badly. But where's the leader commanding them?

No matter. There's no way you can overpower them before they destroy the gate. There's precious little of you, and the goblins are better armed than the tieflings.

Zevlor's hands glow with healing light, which he presses to Kanon's side – nothing. The arrow must have gotten him straight through the heart. Zevlor wipes the man's blood off his hands, cursing in Infernal again. The tieflings from the patrols seem to have taken their positions, Cal, Lia, and Rolan among them; even then it's a tiny force, outnumbered by the goblins at least twice over.

Cries of pain and anger ring out from both sides; you huddle next to the rampart edge where Wyll tackled you, realising, crucially, that you have nothing but your bare hands and an empty lute-case full of school papers. Without producing any music, you have no way to communicate with the Weave, which means you're as defenceless as a newborn kitten.

Wyll risks a peek over the edge. You consider joining him when another volley of arrows strikes, peppering the thin wooden wall that separates you from the invading forces. You glance around the ramparts, checking on the others, watching Rolan hurling bolts of ice magic over the walls as Cal and Lia fire their weapons around him. an especially wily goblin scales the gate and nearly sinks a sword into Rolan, but she's cut down before she can get close. Refugees are shooting arrows and throwing bottles into the fray, but most of those you see are too young or too old to really fight. You spot Danis, unarmoured and terribly exposed in his cloth tunic, hurling broken bottles and flasks of oil over the wall.

Cal takes an arrow through the torso and screams, and Zevlor sprints across the ramparts towards him, another spark of healing magic glowing in his fingers.

There's too many of them. There's not enough of you. If you run now, you might be able to grab the children and elderly and make a run for it. You remember that the druids are lounging peacefully around nearby and silently curse them.

"We need to run," you say.

Wyll gives no indication that he heard you. He's staring out into the battlefield. His expression is utterly unreadable.

"Gale's back," says Wyll.

"What?"

His expression hasn't changed.

"The wizard from the Nautiloid. He's out there fighting the goblins."

"Fuck off."

"He's brought some friends."

"You're messing me about."

"One of them's a githyanki. She just cut a goblin in two."

You risk a peek out.

In the middle of the goblins, a githyanki woman in gleaming armour kicks away half a bisected torso. She whirls her longsword into a defensive stance, parrying a rusted scimitar from one of the remaining goblins; she centres her guard around Gale, who is chanting in a familiar arcane baritone, perfectly intact from when you saw him last. On his flank is a black-haired woman raising a cleric's shield, arrows bouncing off it so easily she must be abjuring it.

"Fuck *off*," you repeat.

Wyll smiles so radiantly he might blind someone.

Gale finishes his chant with a flourish of his hand. Back on the front line, where the githyanki is beating goblins into pulp, the mossy ground trembles for a moment before bursting into globules of thick, oily grease; goblins and hobgoblins start slipping and scrambling for purchase in the muck. From a single dry spotlight of land the githyanki soldier swipes at two goblins unfortunate enough to fall near her, disabling them both in a single brute swing of her longsword.

"I'm going down there," says Wyll, grinning.

"If we open that gate, they'll swarm the place!"

"Not a problem!"

He springs from his crouching position and, before you can stop him, begins to take a running jump at the edge of the rampart.

No music! You're not a bard until the music starts. You slam your hands onto the boards of the rampart walls and frantically beat out a staccato rhythm with your palms, and you get nothing but splinters for an agonising moment as Wyll leaps. Then a spark of Weave – finally! – and you scream, "*Damn it all! Feather Fall!*"

Despite invoking the ancient bardic tenet of *Only Gobshites Name Their Spells Out Loud*, the crude rhyme is just enough to cushion his fall. Wyll blasts a goblin as he falls, and lands light and fast on his feet, finishing the goblin off with a jab from his rapier. The githyanki woman gives him a glance as he joins her, and he gives her a wink and the quip, "Provoke the Blade and suffer its sting!", to which you hear her respond with a curt, "*Ch'k*."

You expect the goblins to run – you can hear their loss approaching with a low whistle in the Weave – but they don't. They snarl and screech, bloodthirsty, and only seem to double down. Wyll dances through the horde like he's rehearsed this with them a million times, always a step ahead, a hair away, his rapier jabbing into exposed body parts like a stinging insect. By comparison, the githyanki is a machine; she hacks and slashes with terrifying speed, and simply absorbs their blows like they're nothing before mowing them down into gory shreds.

You try to ignore the pain in your head. *Attitude is everything in barding*, whispers Sunrise Tavernsong. *Always play like you're on the winning side; bardic magic is about making sweet lies come true.*

So you clamber up to stand directly on top of the rampart walls and, like a fucking muppet, start to clap your hands.

One. Two. Three. Four. As you start to develop a rhythm, the Weave comes through in snatches, then begins to ring more clearly. One. Two. A slow, steady, victorious beat. it's not much, but it'll have to do for now. You look back down at the battlefield with fresh eyes.

Your new allies are powerful – they've turned this from a bloodbath into a true battle. But the notes of danger and injury snag in the melody, and the thrumming angry screech of *booyagh* magic as you notice one of the goblins healing one of his comrades. Zevlor, on the other hand, is nowhere to be seen on this side of the wall.

You look for the cleric and find her cowering from a warg, clutching her hand and shivering. it must have bitten her badly, or perhaps she's not one for direct combat. Either way, you need her back on the front.

"Fight back! Lash out! Take back the upper hand!" you trill, magic amplifying your voice, and the music swells in her direction. She bashes the warg back with her shield, then cracks it in the head with her mace. She also gives you a bit of a dirty look. Maybe you deserve it. Your spells don't even rhyme.

The goblin numbers dwindle down. And still they don't surrender. They don't run. One of them throws back his head and screams wordlessly, a screech of anger and determination.

"Get them into the grease!" You hear Gale's voice cut through the ringing of metal. "Corral them!"

With the feather fall spell you cast on Wyll still ringing in your ears, and with the battlefield much less in the control of the goblins, you jump. You land in pleasing time with the beat, causing a club-swing to conveniently go off-target. the cleric bludgeons your attacker as she moves closer to the action, not even glancing your way.

You search for the magic-wielding goblin, the booyagh, and find him when he screeches something in Goblinoid and sends an arc of sickly green magic shooting towards you. You're too slow to avoid it. A wave of nausea and pain washes over you, spinning you around in a dizzy sway, and you fight to stay on your feet, distantly aware that something large and blurry is coming towards you. Bugbear. Shit.

A deep, guttural voice rocks the inside of your skull: "*Die in the name of the Absolute.*"

The tadpole in your head squirms, as though excited. Is just it your imagination, or are you hearing the words despite the bugbear not saying anything? Surely not.

Something clips the side of your head - an arrow? a rock? hard to say - but it spins you around, toppling you to the ground. You feel the earth shaking - THUMP - THUMP - with the sound of heavy footsteps coming towards you. By the time you've regained your bearings and the ability to see straight, you look up to see the bugbear standing directly over you. He grins, bloodthirsty.

A figure bursts out of seemingly nowhere. The man's hands are a blur. you don't see him slash the bugbear's throat, only see the gushing wound left behind. The bugbear drops dead, and the man – a pale elf with sharp eyes – catches your eye, places a finger over his lips, and winks.

You check nobody's approaching you from behind, and when you glance back, the pale elf's vanished. The bugbear lies dead with no trace of an attacker, as though murdered by a ghost. You focus your attention back to the battlefield, where the last of the goblin forces are rallying for a final push.

Your fellow fighters seem to be having more success than you. The Githyanki shifts on her feet, switches from parrying club blows to sharp lunging attacks, pushing her bugbear quarry. Wyll darts out of close range and begins firing bolts of magic.

You double time on the clapping, and that takes you just out reach of the goblins' swords and potshot arrows. Aradin and his friends begin to pressure them on the other side.

Following Gale's instructions, you're beginning to encircle the goblins. A noose.

(For a brief moment, as you join the circle, I brush your cheek; you ignore me.)

By now the goblin horde has been cut down to a squad. Aradin and his gang force the last bugbear into Gale's grease spell, and together with Will and Lae'zel keep the goblinoids pinned there. Gale stands at the top of a rocky outcrop, surveying the battlefield, and he raises his staff and calls, "Stand back!"

There's a precise, tick-tock twinge of magic in the air, the clockwork hum of wizard-magic. Gale fires a bolt of fire from the tip of his staff and the ground explodes.

The heat forces your eyes shut. There's a hideous roar as the oil bursts into flame, and with it, a gruesome chorus as the last of the goblins scream and burn to a crisp where they stand.

You hear the sound of arcane words and feel another spike of magic; then the roaring flames die down to a flickering smoulder. The bodies left behind aren't pretty to behold, but none of them are yours. The song of combat in the air fades.

The flames die down to ash.

"Well!" says Gale. He surveys the scorch-mark his bonfire left behind for a moment, his mouth twisted up in an adrenaline-mad grin. "I wasn't sure I would see you two again!"

The tension breaks. suddenly everyone's putting away weapons and abandoning their positions. Cal and Lia emerge from the gate, glancing around and then, surreptitiously, beginning to rifle through the pockets of the dead goblins and bugbears. You didn't realise the supply situation was

that desperate until you see Cal take a goblin scimitar and stick it in his belt. The githyanki immediately walks away, apparently uninterested in conversation.

"Friends of yours, Gale?" The elf that saved you earlier suddenly manifests next to you without you noticing, and you almost jump. He must have been hiding there the entire time, standing just in your blind spot. "The Nautiloid had quite a social scene, it seems. I do love meeting new people, especially when their introduction is to appear out of nowhere and begin slaughtering my enemies."

You weren't expecting him to sound so – well – *foppish*. He's a real Upper City type, his clothes and accent all well-refined in the richer echelons of Baldurian city.

"Thanks for earlier," you note.

He turns down to look at you. He has striking red eyes, which contrast with the rest of him. His skin and hair are incredibly pale, even for a moon elf. "Thank you for the opening," he replies, "Should I assume joining the battle unarmed and without armour was a tactical manoeuvre on your part, rather than an act of pure idiocy?"

"Evening! Wyll!" says Gale, saving you from having to answer. "It is my immense pleasure to introduce you to three other survivors from the Nautiloid – Astarion, Shadowheart, and Lae'zel."

Astarion, the pale elf, sheathes his shortsword and gives a small bow. Shadowheart, the cleric, says nothing. Lae'zel, the githyanki, acknowledges the introduction with a toss of her head. You get a closer look at her as she wipes her sword clean on the grass, her face stern and militant. She's young, like Wyll, with slight forks in her pointed ears. You met a githzerai once, a senior Avowed scribe who dropped by the Academy, and he had the same yellow mottled skin and flat nostrils. Unlike him, her cheeks are scored with black warpaint, and she carries herself with a military self-importance. Aradin and his two friends – they seemed to stay out of close range for much of the battle, but you see they're a man and a woman, rangers – give her an extremely wide berth.

The gate rumbles open in front of you. Aradin seems content to ignore you and storm away, but his two companions turn and nod to you as they follow him. Lae'zel immediately strides through the gateway and vanishes at speed, and Gale glances at you and Wyll apologetically before jogging after her, Shadowheart and Astarion in tow.

You trail behind. The gate drops as soon as you trudge through. Apparently they're not keen on more goblins getting in. Your head throbs from where the bugbear clipped you, and you don't notice the conversation happening ahead until you've walked into it.

Aradin and Zevlor seem to be squaring up to each other. Wyll stands between them, looking suddenly very small and lithe compared to the other two men.

"Not only did you lose the druid, you led the goblins right here!" Zevlor roars. "You're gods-damned lucky that none of the goblins escaped alive! You could have gotten all of these people killed!"

"They were going to slaughter me and my crew! I've lost enough good men out there in the fucking ruins. I didn't sign up to fight fucking goblin fanatics!"

"You cowardly excuse for a fighter, you signed up to *keep Halsin safe*! Instead you're the one who's come crawling back empty-handed – I should have left you out there to die!"

"You *did* leave us out there to die, you rat hellspawn *bastard*!"

"Enough!" cries Wyll. He raises his palms, both men stopping to look at him as he speaks.

"Come to your senses and stop arguing. It won't bring back the people you've lost."

They both fume for a moment. Zevlor concedes first. He huffs and breaks away from Aradin and Wyll. Aradin gives Wyll a glare, but it's harmless, the bark of a chained-up dog. He turns, his two lackeys exchanging embarrassed glances as they follow him.

Zevlor busies himself by unfastening his pauldrons. He pulls one off, then the other, the angry flush slowly fading from his face.

"I apologise for that outburst," he murmurs, "Thank you for your help. Those people are with you, then."

'Those people' seem to be having a very confused conversation with one of the friendlier druids, who Bex told you occasionally comes to trade with the refugees. From the sounds of it, Lae'zel is attempting to negotiate the sale of a freshly scavenged human skull, a conversation which seems to be causing some mutual bafflement between her and the trader.

"Yes, they are," you tell Zevlor. "They'll be joining us here. Is that alright?"

"It's the least we can do after you saved our lives," Zevlor responds simply. "Is anyone wounded?"

The pain in the side of your head reminds you that, yes, at least one of you is. "Not badly," you answer.

"I'll need to conserve my magic, then. Go and talk to Nettie in the inner sanctum. she'll have a few poultices and the like." Zevlor spares no more time with you. you watch him hurry over to a bleeding Danis, Bex pressing her hands to a gash in his side, leaving you and Wyll alone again.

"We'd better show our new friends around," notes Wyll.

"And then we need to visit Halsin's apprentice," you say, "Before our skin falls off."

Wyll nods. "Let's figure out who precisely we're agreeing to team up with," he says.

With that, he begins to jog ahead, catching up with Gale and his party.

Chapter 5

Your spot by the river, now that it has six (or seven?) occupants, is beginning to look like a real mercenary camp. For lack of any better meeting space, the six of you squat in the dirt around the campfire, which lacks enough logs and rocks nearby to comfortably sit all of you. At the head of the group is Lae'zel, who has so much military self-importance that she makes the camp feel more like *hers* than all of yours collectively.

"I am Lae'zel of Crèche K'liir," she declares, by way of starting a conversation. "From this point on, you are under *my* command and my protection. Your survival depends crucially on obeying my every order."

You had wondered if the customs of the Material Plane were new to her. You have since found out that, in fact, Lae'zel has never set foot on Faerûn in her life. It has not made her shy.

"It is imperative that you two join us." As she speaks, she unfolds a battered paper map – surely not hers, it looks old and handwritten – and holds it in front of her. "You will be placed under my watch while the *ghaik* tadpole remains. My people alone hold the cure for your condition."

"Her people keep ours as slaves."

Shadowheart states this plainly. Lae'zel gives her a look of cold indifference.

"Slaves were not kept on Crèche K'liir," she says. "It was not deemed necessary. I would find it tiring to deal with *istik* slaves – killing them is far more pragmatic."

"Sorry," interrupts Shadowheart, "Is anyone else listening to this? Are you all insane? We shouldn't follow her *anywhere*!"

Lae'zel gives a contemptuous growl. "It is my people's sacred duty to rid the world of the *ghaik*, including curing those who incubate their young. If you would prefer to transform, I will simply cut you down myself, and take your head as a trophy for Vlaakith!"

"Ladies," says Gale, in a tone of voice that suggests, perhaps, that this is not the first time the issue of group homicide has been raised.

"I'm sure we can reach an accord. As long as you keep no slaves and harm no innocents, then I am happy to stand by you, Lae'zel," says Wyll. "You wield that sword like the finest of dragon-riders I've seen."

"Spare me your flattery!" Lae'zel snaps. "But if your soft heart wishes mercy for our crushed enemies, then I may grant you the privilege of sparing them, as long as you prove your worth in battle."

"It's her open-mindedness that really makes you admire her," remarks Astarion. Nobody acknowledges him.

She points at a spot on the map. "I have acquired intelligence of a githyanki crèche somewhere on the high road alongside the '*Chin-thar*' river."

"Chionthar," Wyll corrects her. She rolls her eyes in a way that suggests the details of this particular landscape are beneath her.

"And your people have a device that can extract the mind flayer tadpoles before ceremorphosis," says Gale. "The zaith'isk."

"Correct. Finding it should be our top priority."

"Personally," says Shadowheart, "I think our top priority – at least, *my* top priority – is getting to Baldur's Gate."

She sits on a rock next to the unlit fire, but she leaves her armour on. She keeps her hands clasped around something black – a toy? – as she speaks. Unlike Lae'zel, she doesn't stand when she addresses the group. She barely looks up.

"How far is this gate?" asks Lae'zel stiffly.

You recall Mol's estimation. "About a tenday."

"There," says Shadowheart, "There's five of us and we're perfectly well-equipped – we could make that journey unscathed. The city is full of temples and healers. There's bound to be *someone* who knows how to deal with these tadpoles."

Shadowheart's hair is fashioned into a high black braid arranged around a silver circlet on her head. She has a way of tossing her head when she speaks that makes her braid dance behind her back.

"There's six of us," you note.

Shadowheart huffs. "I was assuming, given that standard githyanki protocol is to kill all humanoids on sight, that Lae'zel wouldn't want to come."

"You know *nothing* of my people!" Lae'zel snarls.

"Now, hold on," says Wyll, "What's to stop us travelling the high road together and simply stopping off along the way?"

"You're all missing the point," says Gale. "*Ceremorphosis*."

He speaks with the firm, clear cadence of a teacher. his voice naturally halts the others mid-sidetrack.

"Ceremorphosis is a process with an incubation time that ranges from hours to minutes," he says. "Starting with confusion, dizziness, loss of memory, nausea, followed by fever and greying of the skin, inducing physical death through dissolution of the nervous tissue and forcibly reforming the bone and muscle structure into that of a mind flayer."

"Charming," mutters Astarion.

"It is painful, it is revulsive, and most importantly, it is *fast*," says Gale. "Mind flayer tadpoles are voracious little beasts. They begin digestion at the moment of insertion, with a very brief incubation as they psionically remove the free will of the infected victim."

"If you have a point, wizard," Lae'zel snaps, "You would do well to get to it."

"It has been several hours since the Nautiloid crashed," he continues, "Observe that we are completely healthy, reasonably sane, and perky enough to slaughter at least a dozen goblins."

"We could just be transforming slowly," you point out. "It's not been very long."

"Oh, no point developing *that* gloomy hypothesis," Gale waves a hand, "How would we even test it?"

"By waiting an hour or two," you say.

"Anyway, at this rate, we can safely assume the process of ceremorphosis has been interrupted," says Gale, cheerfully ignoring you. "That being the case, we have the luxury of time. We can stay in the grove for a time. There's no point getting ourselves killed following the first lead we come across, and if this Nettie figure knows how to help us then the point is moot."

"I like that plan," remarks Astarion, "I find myself generally fond of any plan that involves staying where I am and not doing anything."

"Not to mention we could make a real difference to these people's lives if we find Halsin," says Wyll, "It sounds like he's an archdruid of some acclaim. Druids are powerful healers – he could help."

"Yes, that too, of course," says Astarion, "Those poor refugees. My heart truly does bleed for them, even though they're perfectly fine and we're the ones with mind flayer tadpoles in our heads. Perhaps we should just exterminate the local goblins entirely, while we're here?"

"Yes, perhaps we should!" says Wyll. He is clearly very proud of this comeback. Astarion sneers.

"Look," says Gale carefully, "I don't know about *you*, but I have just had nine hells of a day. We're alive, we've acquired this... extremely charming patch of scrubland," he waves a hand, "And thanks to the ingenuity of our new friends, we have a perfectly good cover story to stay here and ask questions. Our chances are better if we share a base and any information we find with each other. Let's stay here, at least for tonight, and not make any hasty decisions until we have more information. Agreed?"

Tension hangs in the air for a reluctant moment. You think of the children at break-times, conducting games of stick-in-the-mud and tip-the-can with so much gravity and seriousness like they're the parliament of the Lords' Alliance. The act of standing around in a circle, taking turns to lead an increasingly pointless conversation, all dressed in outlandishly different clothes – wasn't being at school just like this? You remember being shorter than everyone else there too.

"Agreed," says Shadowheart. "For tonight."

There's a lot left unsaid in her agreement. But it's enough to dissolve the unofficial meeting, as it were. Lae'zel dumps her pack on the ground, signalling that talking time is over and sullenly-taking-off-your-armour time has begun. Shadowheart silently stands and leaves, and Astarion, in the way that you're starting to get used to, simply vanishes while you're not looking at him and is now nowhere to be seen.

Gale sits on the ground next to the unlit campfire. He runs a hand through his hair in a way that is calculatedly relaxed.

"You've made some interesting friends since we last saw you, Gale," says Wyll. "How did you survive the crash?"

"Excellent question!" says Gale. "The answer in *arcane* terms is rather complex, but I'll boil it down to the most important part. I was saved. We were *all* saved, in fact. Did either of you hear a strange voice when you fell?"

"That's right," says Wyll, "Something that claimed to be a guardian."

"Shadowheart and Lae'zel were the ones to pilot the Nautiloid just before it was destroyed – fortunately for the rest of us, because I'd much rather be on the Sword Coast than the Nine Hells. They experienced the same thing. Astarion's story is much the same." Gale raises his eyebrows. "Curious, that."

"Any idea what it means?" says Wyll.

"I haven't the foggiest notion. But I prefer not to look a gift horse in the mouth. Or a gift tadpole in the eye, in this case." Gale gives a cheerful shrug. "I ought to cook a slow roast. Do you hunt?"

"Oh," says Wyll, and grins, "I think you and I are going to get along."

You leave the two of them to catch up and duck into the tent Wyll built for you.

Inside the privacy of your new canvas-sheet home you carefully untie your hair, letting it fall to your shoulders in messy red ringlets. You feel the side of your head and find yourself developing a large and impressively painful bump, which has also started bleeding since you were last paying attention to it.

After a few painful attempts to neaten your hair without aggravating the wound, you simply put your hands to your scalp and, making sure nobody is close enough to hear, hum one of your mother's songs of healing. The swelling shrinks and vanishes, and you use your fingers to brush out your hair.

You seriously need to get an instrument before you get into danger next, even if it's just a carved whistle or a glass bottle. Of course, you don't have anything with you with which to make or buy anything – you don't even own a comb, or any clothes aside from the ones you're wearing. All of your possessions are at the Academy, which, last time you saw it, was being torn apart by a giant Illithid tentacle.

"Everything I had is gone," you say out loud, just to see if it provokes a reaction. But your heart and guts are cool and still as a glass of water.

You redirect your attention to the only thing left that you own; Jerry's lute-case. This time, as you go through the pockets, you methodically lay out everything on the bedroll you pilfered from the druids' supplies.

Three lead pencils. A set of chalk pieces of various colours. Crumpled sheet music for a kids' version of the *Cormyr Polka*. Spare strings – useful, if you still had the lute. A notebook with three filled pages of writing exercises. And then, the stack of old papers, including the mysterious letter from Imoen.

It's clear that this was once a single wrapped bundle of papers, but the brown paper wrapping and string have been unwrapped and pulled loose. Imoen's letter is one of a stack of many loose, yellowed pages; more letters from her are there, as well as unsigned letters from different writers. Most are addressed to or from Gorion, but some mention a name that has been fastidiously censored in black ink. You recognise some of the pages as spell scrolls, but not ones you could even begin to translate enough to cast. There's a single old journal, its leather cover faded with age. its pages are filled with spidery handwriting in a language you don't recognise, filled with diagrams and drawings that make no sense to you, except there's a distinct look of Weave about them.

Only one letter is typewritten on fresh, new card-paper.

Tav,

You're in over your head. Take the Bhaalspawn File and get away from Baldur's Gate as quickly as you can. Don't tell anyone you have it or where you obtained it. Don't let anyone read it. The murders will get worse and there is nothing we can do. Trust nobody. The academy is already compromised. Don't contact me again.

O

"What the hell?" you say out loud, but once again you feel nothing except stupid.

There's no other letters from this writer, and no other mention of 'Tav' or 'O' anywhere else. There's no indication which documents, if any, are parts of the Bhaalspawn File. If the Bhaalspawn File *is* a literal file. It could be a magic item, a spell, a codeword – anything you can give a fancy capitalised title.

Was Jerryl a *spy*? Have the Knights of the Shield started doing information drops at *children's schools*? You knew the Avowed were political in their own way, but in your head they're just an order of conservative scholar-priests who don't get up to much outside of transcribing documents. You find it difficult any of them would be involved in anything as gruesome as *murders*, plural. And yet...

...Master Adrian, the ancient human from Candlekeep who sent you out to look for Jerryl, had the full name *Omar Adrian*. You know Omar Adrian's family has lived in Candlekeep for generations, meaning he'd be in a good position to inherit the belongings of a Candlekeep-born woman named Imoen.

Is Tav *you*?

No, surely not. Even if 'Tav' could be short for 'Tavernsong', *don't contact me again* seems like it was intended for someone else. On the other hand: the words *you're in over your head* are definitely very fucking true. You pocket the note anyway, just in case it's the kind of note that needs to be kept close.

You bundle the rest of the papers back together again and carefully place them back in the case's hidden compartment. It seems obvious, looking at it now, that the case was *made* for smuggling. Jerryl was clever, but he was a *child*. *He* was a completely normal seven-year-old, aside from

being book-smart and good at magic. Jerryl's mother, in your memory, is a widow who runs a successful vedbread stall in Rivington. Completely normal-seeming.

When you found Jerryl, he had been holding onto this case like it was life or death. Who was he taking orders from, that he risked his life like that? He was a very trusting boy. He would have been easy to trick.

Had Master Adrian known, when he sent you to search for Jerryl, that he was sending you to your death?

You've had your fill of reading. A chill runs over your skin, and you rub your arms. You crave the sunlight and company outside.

You tie your hair back into a bun and prepare to step outside again, keeping the case protectively strapped on your back. You have work to do, after all. You have names and stories to record. What can you do except pretend you're a bard and keep going?

Outside you discover, not to your surprise, that literally everyone has both the knowledge and materials to erect their own tent except for you.

"A shelter like this could be constructed by any Githyanki child," Lae'zel declares. "By the age of ten, I could survive a week alone in the wilderness."

You were worried Lae'zel wouldn't care for conversation. She sharpens her sword and javelins, oils her armour, and generally puts on a show of having more important things to do than talk. An interesting part of her setup is a little training dummy, scored with dozens of marks where Lae'zel has hit it with throwing knives. This, apparently, is what passes for a hobby in Crèche K'liir. To your relief, she seems happy enough to answer your questions, in her own way.

"Where is Crèche K'liir?" you ask her.

She points to the part of the sky where the daytime moon is visible.

"The Tears," she says, "In the tail of the moon you call Selûne. There it lies, in the remains of this system's biggest stardock."

"On one of the meteors?"

"Our crèches are widespread across the planes. There are many, including in this Fae-run. I must find the closest one and obtain my new orders."

You ignore the mispronunciation. "A crèche is where your people live? Your equivalent of towns and villages?"

"Incorrect. The githyanki live in the Astral – beyond the limits of space and time, removed from the baseness of planes as these." She smirks a little at that, an unexpected bit of good humour you weren't expecting. You begin to wonder if Lae'zel's apparent rudeness is more alien culture clash than genuine impatience. You're pretty sure she is enjoying this conversation with you. "A crèche is a brooding ground, the place where we hatch and train our young. They serve also as points of military command in the planes. But a true warrior wishes for nothing more to surpass them – to join the ranks of Vlaakith's knights and earn her place in the Astral."

Lae'zel becomes more passionate as she speaks. She doesn't smile, but in the corners of her mouth and the tilt of her head there is joy. It manifests as the smug, self-assured dignity of a proud housecat.

"When I present the head of a *ghaik* to my superiors I will finally ascend the ranks," she says, "Someday I will wield a sword of silver and ride a red dragon among Vlaakith's finest. It is the dream of every young githyanki."

You remember the githyanki on the dragon who destroyed your lute. Well, it's good to know that he probably had a high career satisfaction, at least.

"What will you do when you find the crèche and become purified?" you ask. "Will they send you back to Crèche K'liir?"

She hesitates, and you see in the way her face stiffens that she doesn't know. "I will receive my new orders upon arrival," she says.

By contrast, Shadowheart is extremely unhappy to answer questions about herself. She makes this very clear.

"I'm like you – stuck in a bad situation with a mind flayer tadpole in my skull. I'm not in the mood to talk about my life story. Are you *writing this down?*"

"It's a bard thing," you tell her, "If I know more about someone, it's easier to do magic on them."

"Really?" she huffs. "How convenient, having a magical reason to ask whatever you want. You can't work with what you have? There's beauty in secrecy, you know."

"That's true," you note. "Will I write down 'secretive' and 'mysterious' for you, then?"

Shadowheart plays with her little toy. It's a many-sided cube with little spikes at the points, smooth and shiny like it's made of enamel.

She says, "I need to get to Baldur's Gate for personal reasons. It's urgent. Will that do?"

You write it down. For someone who doesn't like to talk about herself, it's a pretty big piece of information.

Astarion has more to say than Shadowheart, but none of it is narratively compelling enough to be much good for bardic magic.

"I saw you all on the ship, you know, but I thought you were all thralls trying to kill me," says Astarion, waving a hand, "Good thing these tadpoles of ours function as little lie detectors. Have you noticed?"

"Wyll has heard a few of my thoughts."

"That's not surprising. They're extremely loud."

Oh for fuck's sake. You ask, "How were you captured?"

"I was at work. I just happened to be snatched up in the chaos, like you were." He shrugs. "I'm a magistrate in the city. It's all rather tedious, really."

"Where do you work?"

"Good grief, is this a conversation or are you launching an investigation into the legal system for the Flaming Fist? How can that information possibly be useful for your magic?"

"Just curious." You make a note that Astarion, like Shadowheart, is rather secretive. "Where did you learn to fight?"

"I've picked up a few tricks here and there. You know how it is, so many adventurers these days. Even ordinary citizens need to take up a dagger every now and again. You would understand, of course, being a completely ordinary schoolhouse matron?"

"Fair enough."

He is squarely beaten in conversational enthusiasm by Gale, who has so much to say about himself you simply stop writing it down after a page. He also has no qualms about you taking notes as he speaks, because he is, in fact, also taking notes as *you* speak. Wizards and bards just take a lot of notes. Your colleagues at the Academy are always taking little quest notes about you when they think you're not watching.

"...My scholarly achievements are, of course, quite *modest* in the entire historiographical existence of ritual portal creation altogether. However, the last century has been *extremely* unkind to the practice, and a great deal of good academic discourse simply lies in the re-opening and re-interpretation of books long considered antiquated. You might say I am a *modern expert*. An

older wizard can easily forget the difference in advancement in the span of a decade or two. The portal that I created on the nautiloid..."

You have also learned: Gale attended Blackstaff academy, lives in a tower in Waterdeep, has a winged cat familiar named Tara there, has developed a recent interest in evocation magic, enjoys red wine especially from Cormyr, occasionally writes poetry, and once placed second in a Waterdhavian cooking contest. He reminds you very much of the wizards at the academy. Nobody practices wizardry who isn't deeply nerdy on *some* level.

"My colleagues probably know who you are," you tell him, "But I'm not much of a scholar."

"Still! Matron at the Unrolling Scroll academy, eh? I bet the library is to *die* for. And I fancy the scribes have some extremely interesting stories to tell, too. I'm almost envious!"

This *would* sound like sarcasm coming from someone else, but Gale sounds perfectly sincere. Despite the way he speaks, there is something about him that is very unpretentious. he strikes you as someone rather honest, probably not entirely through choice. The one topic he avoids speaking on is what he was doing when he was captured, and he does quite a bad job acting nonchalant about it.

"Nothing, really. Ordinary day, as I remember. It's all a bit of a blur. What were *you* doing?"

As Gale listens to you recount how you got here, it occurs to you that you haven't mentioned the lute-case to anyone else. Everyone assumed – reasonably enough, because you were dancing around doing magic with it – that the lute was yours. If Gale is a prominent enough wizard, he might know something about what the Bhaalspawn File is supposed to be.

Only...

Don't tell anyone you have it or where you obtained it. Don't let anyone read it.

The academy has already been compromised.

Maybe that particular detail of your predicament is best kept secret for now.

"You handle yourself extremely well for a magical hobbyist, you know," says Gale. "Evening Tavernsong, daughter of Sunrise Tavernsong, was it? Do you publish any songs or poetry? I'm quite the connoisseur, you know."

Shit. Never let your tongue slip around a wizard. He's got your mother's name memorised.

"I never performed," you tell him, "My mother was very... niche."

"I suppose I know very little about Baldurian poetry. Do you have any recommendations?"

Your mother raised you exclusively on poetry by Volo, which you hated. You cannot tell the wizard you hate Volo. He may stop respecting you, or worse, ask questions about it.

"I don't know any either. Have you heard of analytic geometry? The scribes have been talking about it for weeks," you say.

"Analytic geometry! The novel mathematical concept?" Gale's eyebrows raise. "I've never met a bard who enjoyed mathematics. I find that barding isn't very mathematical at all. It's rather unlike wizardry, in that regard."

"I'm not a bard," you say, "I'm a matron."

"I don't think *our* matron enjoyed mathematics," he says, and chuckles to himself. "Although, really, I don't think our matron enjoyed *anything*, except perhaps the satisfaction of catching a student in the act of breaking the rules and administering a swift rebuke."

Then you watch him write the words *analytic geometry* in the margins of his spellbook. It is flattering, sort of.

When you're done you circle back around to Wyll, who's been sitting in the opening of his tent pretending not to watch you interview everyone.

"Odd bunch," he remarks, "What do you make of them?"

You cast your gaze around the camp. It's fully made-up now, your new companions seemingly settled-in to the meadow that is your only home left standing.

Does that bother you? Not as much as it should, for some reason.

"I like them," you say.

He nods. "And it's good to have allies. There's danger ahead, I'm sure of it. Although for now, we ought to go and speak to Halsin's apprentice."

"Alright. I'll gather the party."

"The party?" he says, amused.

"We *are* an adventuring party."

Wyll grins. "I suppose saving the grove from goblins *is* the kind of thing a party of adventurers ought to do. I did always fancy myself a folk hero with a band of roving adventurers, like in the old tales."

"An 'adventuring party' is any group of unemployed people travelling the Sword Coast," you say.

"You're not much of a *romantic*, are you, Evening?" Wyll asks.

"Just Eve."

"Eve. That's a pretty name."

"No, I'm not much of a romantic."

He laughs. "Alright, Eve," he says, and rises to his feet. "Time to venture forth."

Chapter 6

Nettie is the most useful person you've met so far: she's your size and happy to give you some of her clothes. You still have a mind flayer tadpole in your skull, but at least now you're not going to be stuck wearing the same underwear till the end of your days.

"It's the least I can do. We should have been there – *I* should have been there, at least, helping defend the people. I don't know what brought ye here, but it's a true blessing you arrived when you did. Nobody died when the goblins struck – we haven't always been so lucky."

Halsin's chambers are in the Inner Sanctum, meaning you had to slink past Kagha and a couple of other druids to get here. Lae'zel and Shadowheart were uninterested in coming, but Gale and Astarion are in tow now. Either someone told Kagha who Gale and Astarion are, or she just doesn't care. She didn't ask them who they were, and whatever she's talking about now, she barely notices them enter at all. She and her friends speak with conspiratorial softness, as though concerned you might be eavesdropping.

Nettie's workshop seems to serve the simultaneous purposes of hospital, alchemical workshop, library, artefact storage and living space. The druids don't seem to go much in for property, it seems. Her only patient is a little bird with a bandaged wing, who stares timidly at you from the top of a stone table.

"Now," says Nettie, when she's finished packing the little knapsack that is now your entire wardrobe. "I suppose ye'll be wanting more than just a change of clothes, having walked through the viper's nest to get here."

She's not being entirely figurative. There was a very large, hissing viper coiled around Kagha's shoulders.

"Indeed," says Wyll, "We came because we heard Halsin was an accomplished healer, and you were his apprentice."

"For my sins."

Nettie crosses her arms. She's a small, willowy woman, made a little smaller by the puffy leaf-garments and rough leathers the druids wear. She looks no older than two score years, practically still a girl by halfling standards. She hides it well, but she's a little awed by you four.

"Are you hurt?" she asks. "Sick?"

"Not quite," says Wyll. "We're... Hm. How can I put this... Well. We met just a day ago, on board of a—"

"Oh for the love of *god*." Astarion's voice cuts across him. "We've got mind flayer spawn in our heads. Can you cure us or not?"

Nettie takes a step back. To her credit, her confident facade doesn't waver a bit; her face remains carefully blank.

"Mind flayer spawn," she repeats.

"We're not transforming!" says Gale quickly. "We're trying to find a way to get rid of the tadpoles – we don't, as you can imagine, have much time."

"There's more of you," she says.

"More of us?" you say.

Nettie stares at you, silent.

"What do you mean, *more of us*? What are you talking about?" Astarion's red eyes narrow suspiciously. "What do you know?"

There's a flash of fear in Nettie's eyes. With Astarion towering over her like he does, he cuts a fairly imposing figure. Still she doesn't answer immediately; she simply gazes up at him for a moment, betraying nothing, before saying, "That depends on who's asking."

"What the hells is *that* supposed to mean?" Astarion snarls. There's no better way to put it: his lips draw back with such animalistic fury that he looks for a moment like he's baring fangs.

Before he can say anything more, Wyll places a cautionary hand on his shoulder, and Astarion jerks himself away, glowering. Wyll turns back to Nettie, ignoring him.

"We don't want to hurt anyone. We're just looking for help. By the Oak Father's teachings, show us some mercy – we're just trying to live," says Wyll. "If you know *anything* about this, it might help us survive. *Please*."

Her gaze meets yours. She must see *something* in your eyes – maybe a spark of goodness, or maybe just your embarrassment – because she relaxes a little, uncrossing her arms.

"You'd better come with me," she says. "I'll show you the laboratory."

The stone walls are inlaid with carved lines and patterns, and when Nettie places her hand on a seemingly-random spot of wall, a pulse of pale blue light passes through the carvings, briefly illuminating her handprint. A section of the wall slides away to reveal itself as a secret door, revealing a new chamber within.

This room is much more well-appointed than the other. Here the surfaces are scattered with alchemical equipment and papers, and you spot bottles of odd preserved specimens – tentacles, eyeballs – amongst the clutter. There are books, and they aren't neat either; he carved stone shelves hold ancient slabs and scrolls mixed haphazardly with modern-bound books and sheets of typewriting. That's hardly scientific. If Halsin was researching *anything* in here, he either had a very odd organisation system, or he was doing kind of a bad job.

The laboratory raises some other questions about Halsin. For a start, he has an entire man lying dead on a stone slab. The man is a drow elf, his grey skin tinged blue with death; jagged stitches connect his scalp with what remains of his head. Next to the stone slab that serves as his autopsy table, sheets of parchment are filled with charcoal sketches. The man's body; his face; a diagram of a tadpole, like the one that crawled into your eye.

"By the gods," murmurs Gale. "What *is* all of this?"

The false-wall slides back into place with a rumble, silencing the murmurations of the other room. All is silent. Nettie glances between the dead man and you, and there's an awkward pause, as though the cadaver might sit up and introduce himself at any moment.

"This is the only one of them we were able to catch. We've been tracking them down for a while now," says Nettie, "Me and Halsin. They're a group of... I suppose you'd call them cultists. They call out to a god named the Absolute."

"You killed this man?" says Gale.

"Only after he tried to kill us first. And when he died, this... *thing*... came crawling out of his eye."

She holds up a jar. Inside is what looks like a giant, whiskered leech. its many-toothed mouth sucks hungrily at the glass where her hands are, its swollen body writhing with excitement. For a moment you think the jar is full of water, but then you realise the tadpole is simply suspending itself with its own psychic power, levitating in the middle of the jar.

"And Halsin was *studying* this specimen," says Gale. His attention is barely on the parasite. He's far more interested in Halsin's work desk. He skims the papers, frowning. "He's made notes."

"We haven't learned much," says Nettie, "Only that the parasite is bigger, stronger, and it doesn't age. It doesn't transform its victims. It's been...altered."

"Altered?"

Gale takes the jar from Nettie, frowning at it. It stops banging the glass and pauses as he examines it.

"Some kind of strange magic," says Nettie, "Halsin was certain it was touched by the Shadowfell."

Gale touches the fingertips of his free hand to his eyelids. He murmurs something arcane, and when he opens his eyes again, they've obtained a slightly blue glow. He examines the tadpole again with his newly-buffed eyes, presumably looking for some kind of magic.

"What made him think it was the Shadowfell?" asks Gale.

"It was the cutists," says Nettie. "They said they were going to a place called Moonrise. Do you know it?"

Gale shakes his head.

"I don't either," Nettie says, "But the name made Halsin awfully agitated. Whatever Shadow-magic he was looking for, he didn't find it. Whoever manipulated this tadpole, it wasn't Shadow Druids. we'd have seen the signs."

"No, because it *wasn't* Fell magic," murmurs Gale. He blinks the light out of his eyes and replaces the tadpole on the desk. "Some kind of magical alteration has been performed on that tadpole, but it's not the kind that the Shadow Druids practice. It's... I don't know what it is, precisely."

The tadpole presses hungrily against the glass. You feel a squirm of solidarity behind your eye, and wince.

"Neither did Halsin," says Nettie, "But he was certain he'd find the answer if he followed the trail to Moonrise. That was what made him hire Aradin's crew and go out west, to the old Selûnite temple. He said it would just be a few days..."

She sighs.

"I begged him not to go," she says, "That tensions were too high, that there'd be too much healing to do. But it was important to him. More important than anything, I think."

"I see," says Gale quietly. "His disappearance must have been difficult for you. You have our sympathies."

Behind him, Astarion rolls his eyes.

"Halsin would be able to tell you more, but... Well, that's all I know," says Nettie. "Have a look around, if you like. Just... leave his things here, would you? I'm hoping he'll be back soon."

"We'll do everything we can to bring Halsin home," says Wyll, and thumps his chest for emphasis. "You have my word."

Nettie opens the stone doorway again, replacing the silence with chirping birdsong and the sound of distant arguing druids.

"I'd worry about yourselves first," she responds. "Infected things don't live for long. It's not the way of nature."

Whatever Wyll has to say to that is lost. From several rooms away comes Rath's voice, raised enough to cut cleanly through the stone walls. "Kagha, have you lost your mind?! She's a *child!*"

"Perhaps..." begins Astarion, but Wyll just brushes wordlessly past him. "...Or not! We'll just go and directly involve ourselves in the commotion immediately. What a fantastic idea."

Gale and Nettie bolt after Wyll. Astarion looks down at you, arching a well-groomed eyebrow.

"Is he always like this?" says Astarion, waving a hand.

"I've only known him for a few hours," you say. Then again, *how* many times has Wyll unconditionally saved your life today? "But yes, I think so."

He tuts and rolls his eyes. Astarion, at least, seems to dislike Gale and Wyll *more* than he dislikes you. You are vaguely flattered. He seems like the kind of man who is generous with nothing whatsoever.

You look past where Nettie is hiding in the doorway. Kagha and Rath are both standing, posture firm, hands open; a twang in the air, the magical equivalent of one opponent sizing up another. The kids at the Academy fight like nobody's business, and magical children rarely hold back when things come to blows. These are two druids about to get violent, or worse.

Behind them, with Kagha's viper winding around her tiny shoulders, is a little tiefling girl.

Kagha shouts, "She's a *thief*, Rath! The Idol is sacred, and more importantly, vital to the Rite!"

"And it is *safe*, so call off Teela and let the girl free—"

"*Free?* Free to eat our food, drink our water, and steal as she likes from us?" Kagha's animal instinct seems to overtake her for a moment. The hiss through her bared teeth is animal, serpentine. "We have given the devilkin *everything*, and this is how they repay us: sending one of their children to steal our most sacred artefact!"

"You're delusional!" Rath snaps. Behind him, in the darkness, there's a low growl. A wolf you hadn't previously noticed lurks in the shadows behind Rath, hackles raised. "She is barely even ten winters old. But you string her up like a criminal!"

"Because she committed a *crime!*"

"I'm sorry!" bursts out the girl. Her voice wavers with tears, but she keeps her body stiff; even with the viper's fangs facing away from her, its long, coiling body still droops across her shoulders. "I'm really sorry! I thought we were going to die, that's the only reason I took it! I was scared we'd have to leave and the g-goblins would—"

"*Silence!*" Kagma's fury lunges from Rath to the child in an instant, and the girl whimpers.

The child's accent isn't as city-roughened as Mol and the others. She pronounces her words with proper Chondathan syllables, a child with an education. Of course, no matter how wealthy or educated her parents might have been, after the Fall of Elturel any tiefling in the city would be considered a threat first and a citizen second. If this child came from wealth once, she'll never see a penny of it again. She's as thin and starved as the rest, now.

Rath presses, "Kagma, this has gone too far! These are *children*. We are helping *refugees*! Have you forgotten who we are? When we stood with the warriors of Selûne—"

"I am your *Archdruid*!" Kagma screeches. "We are druids! The strong survive and the weak perish. That is nature. Enough of this! We need to protect the Grove!"

Rath turns in desperation towards Wyll and Gale. Nettie stays ducked away, out of sight. Her nervousness makes it clear she has no power to intervene here.

"If you harm a hair on this child's head—" Wyll begins.

"If I may!" says Gale. He's not standing next to Wyll so much as he's put his body between Wyll and the argument – with your respective tadpoles, you can feel waves of righteous anger rolling off of Wyll. "I believe the writings of the Archdruid Shadowmoon can be illustrative here. According to the Guardian of Chondalwood..."

The little girl's terrified, tear-stained eyes meet yours. She's about the same age as Jerryll, maybe. Her amber eyes are like smouldering embers in pools of shadow. How people feed their racism against tieflings is easy to imagine. black eyes, mottled skin, horns, tails. But you don't understand racism against *children*. You don't understand how anybody can look into those tearful eyes and say *devil* – she weeps exactly the same as any other child.

"Ssscared of Teela," says the snake around the girl's shoulders.

"Sorry?" you say.

Its beady black eyes look at you.

"Teela's fangs are sharp. Her body is beautiful. Scared of Teela," the snake continues. It has a soft female voice. its mouth doesn't move with the words. Only when its mouth produces a hiss do the sounds come together: "*Ssscared*."

You turn to Astarion. "Did that snake just talk?" you ask.

"No," says Astarion, "Are you insane?"

You turn back to the snake. "Did you just talk?"

"Small woman. Plump flesh. So sharp are Teela's teeth. So deadly is Teela's venom."

The snake begins to crawl in your direction. The girl makes no indication of hearing its words.

"Thissss one is bigger, tastier, healthier. But *this* one," Teela glances back at the girl, "Is Kagha's enemy, and Teela is not hungry, and Teela is not disloyal." Its tongue flicks at the air.

Rath and Kagha either don't notice that the snake is talking to you or don't care.

"Your scales are very beautiful," you tell the snake, trying to ignore the fact that Teela is thinking about eating you.

"Correct," says Teela. "Exquisite pattern. Bright colours. So beautiful are Teela's scales."

"You must be good at hunting," you continue.

"Yessss," Teela hisses, "Hunting. But Teela is fed, well-fed. Kagha has enemies, and Teela bites. Teela's venom is Kagha's venom, Teela's teeth are Kagha's teeth. Teela protects Kagha, Kagha protects Teela."

Well. At least Kagha is nice to the *snake*.

You lower your voice.

"You don't need to protect Kagha from this child," you murmur, "She's harmless."

"She has no fangs, she has no venom." Teela casts an eye over the girl. "But Kagha is afraid, very afraid. She has many predators, and her territory is so often invaded."

"She's mistaken this girl for a predator," you tell the snake, "But she's a child. Not even fully grown."

You can read no emotion in the snake's face. it simply hangs still and silent.

"A hatchling," muses the snake. "Teela was a hatchling once, and Kagha held her with warm hands. Hatchlings are young and foolish. Soft things, like shadows. Sometimes the shadows look like eagles, or mongeese."

"Yes," you urge Teela, "Kagha is mistaken. She's harmless. Perhaps she'll calm down if she remembers how she held you in her warm hands?"

The girl chokes back a cry of fear as Teela begins to move, but she stays frozen. Teela's coils loosen, and the snake lowers her body to the ground and crawls over to Kagma, winding up her arm.

Astarion sits on a stone, so his face is level with yours.

"That was extremely funny to watch," he murmurs.

"That snake can talk," you insist.

"No it can't."

"It said *words* to me."

"*You* said words, darling. The snake looked at you and stared. Either you did a little magic by accident, or you're simply going completely cuckoo. Who can say?"

You watch Teela approach. Rath and Kagma seem to have been slightly lulled by Gale's monologue. He's carefully avoiding making any definitive statements, making it unclear whose side of the argument he's on. His plan, perhaps, is to bore the druids so much they stop arguing. "According to the Oak Father, punishment is a function of nature with purpose," Gale is explaining, his polite teacher's cadence carefully deconstructing the tension in the air. "Wild animals can be seen to flagellate their young as a vital part of the learning process of a social animal..."

Teela curls her body around Kagma's shoulders and puts her head next to Kagma's ear. If she speaks, you don't hear anything. But Kagma gives a curt nod.

"Very well," she says, and turns to the girl. "It's your lucky day, girl – Teela is feeling merciful, and she bids me let you go. Get out of here before I change my mind."

The girl doesn't need telling twice. She scurries away, refusing to turn her back on the snake until she's through the door outside.

Kagma looks down at you, the viper wound around her shoulders.

"Tell Zevlor his time is up." Her fiery temper seems to have cooled to a terrifying ice. "No outsiders will be permitted in the Grove during the ritual."

"Yes, Archdruid," you answer.

"Out of my sight," says Kagma dully. She sounds more stressed than angry. You don't know whether that comment is directed at you or Rath, but now seems like a great time to escape.

As you scurry away, avoiding eye contact with any watching druids, Astarion sidles up behind you and murmurs, "My *hero*."

You snort.

In the Hollow, you catch up with Wyll, Gale, and two extremely relieved tiefling parents.

"Arabella, what were you thinking? You have gotten yourself *killed*!" The girl's mother shakes her shoulders, then hugs her, then shakes her shoulders again.

Arabella is all smiles now that she's out of the inner sanctum. "I'm sorry. I wanted to stop the ritual. Mol said they were doing a new spell to get rid of us and if they didn't have their idol—"

"That Mol!" Arabella's mother fumes. "I should have known this was her idea! I don't want you hanging around that girl anymore, alright? She's trouble!"

"Arabella, love, look who's here," says her father.

Arabella looks up at you, eyes big. "Thank you for helping me," she says.

"But of course," says Wyll, even though he didn't do anything. "You don't need to worry about saving everyone, Arabella. Leave that to the professionals."

"It's true, then? Rath hired you to find Halsin?" says Arabella's mother.

Hired is a strong word. Rath begged you to find Halsin, but your impression is that the request wasn't directed at *you* so much as the entire universe.

"We're going to do everything we can," Wyll answers.

"You're good folk," says the father, "It means a lot. Cheers."

"I don't suppose there's anything by way of a reward for saving your daughter, then?" says Astarion, hovering at Wyll's shoulder. Wyll scowls.

"If my father were here, I'd see you properly rewarded." Arabella's mother smiles. "I wish I could do more. But here."

She reaches up around her neck and unclasps a necklace. From her neck she pulls a golden locket on a chain, which she holds out.

"Oh, no," says Wyll, "There's no need..."

"Please," says Arabella's mother. "If it helps you at any point, I'll be glad you had it. Try opening it."

Wyll examines the golden locket, then pops it open. When he does, three bright white lights come spiralling out, gently encircling his hand.

"Better than any torch or lantern," she says. "My name's Komira. And my husband's Locke. Let us know if you need anything, all right?"

Wyll nods. Arabella waves as her parents usher her away.

"Well, it's not much of a profit, but at least we can sell it," remarks Astarion.

"We shouldn't demand anything of these people. They have little enough as it is." Wyll folds up the chain and holds out the locket to you. "Here, you keep it. You used magic and convinced that snake to change Kagh's mind, didn't you?"

"Oh. Er. Yes?"

"I'll take it if you don't want it," Astarion chips in.

"You're not taking it," says Wyll coldly.

"Oh? And why not?"

"Because you can see in the dark." Wyll rolls his one good eye. "You're an elf."

"I must have forgotten." Astarion shrugs cheerfully. The more annoyed Wyll gets, the more cheerful Astarion seems to become.

Before Wyll can retort, though, Gale appears at his elbow and says, "Wyll, a word?"

Astarion looks hungrily at the locket. You put it protectively into your lute case.

"I need a musical instrument," you mutter.

"I need a good bottle of wine and a nice shag, but being stranded and broke in the middle of nowhere has proven pretty dry on that particular front."

You can't help it; you laugh.

"Well, I suppose we had better be getting back to camp," Astarion waves a hand. "Lots to talk about. Plans to make."

You nod.

"For example," says Astarion, removing a paper from his waistcoat pocket and waving it, "Did you know that Kagha has been meeting someone in secret?"

"What?"

He hands you the paper. You read,

Kagha.

Swamp-dock. Come alone.

Start the Rite of Thorns.

Burn this note.

Olodan.

Underneath is a little diagram you don't understand.

"She didn't burn it," you remark.

"No, indeed. Fortunately for us."

"I wonder what the Rite of Thorns is."

"What an excellent question. Can I interest you in a little literature on the subject?"

He reaches into his *other* waistcoat pocket and hands you a slim, roughly-bound book entitled *Silvanite Rituals*.

You squint at Astarion's seemingly un-stuffed pockets.

"How much stuff do you have?" you ask, flicking through the book for the Rite of Thorns. You're impressed. You're certain Astarion was within eyeshot the entire time.

"Oh, just a few bits and pieces here and there. Nothing that'll be missed *too* sorely."

"...Any musical instruments?"

He puts a hand on his chest. "That I would hide from *you*? Darling, you wound me."

He's definitely buttering you up, and it's definitely working. Unfortunately, Astarion is the funniest person you've met so far, so no matter how much of a bastard he is, you find yourself glad he's around.

You read aloud, "*The Rite of Thorns. A rare Silvanite ritual said to completely encase, protect, and isolate.* That's... vague."

"What's that?" says Wyll, who is apparently done talking with Gale and is looking over your shoulder. You feel him touch your bag, like he's trying to rest a hand on your shoulder and missed.

Astarion grins, "Oh, nothing, really. Just a little light larceny."

Wyll grimaces. "After Nettie asked us not to take anything?"

"She asked us not to take Halsin's notes, and, sure enough, his notes are currently whole and unmolested on his desk. Now, do you know what she said nothing about?" Astarion winks. "His diary."

"Let me read those," says Gale eagerly. The theft doesn't seem to bother him in the slightest.

You hand Gale the open book and note. He reads both with absurd speed – he barely glances at each page.

"Interesting. Very, very, *very* interesting," murmurs Gale, "Not written in ink, but blood. And not written so much as *scratched* - as though by an animal. This is clearly a note written by a druid, to a druid. So why, in a grove of supposedly unified druids, would one need to burn the note?"

He flicks through the book's pages. A slow grin forms on his face.

"I do love a good mystery, don't you?" he says.

"I'm as eager to see Kagha taken down a peg as you are, believe me," says Wyll, "But we're supposed to be looking for Halsin. He's the healer who was researching our condition. Kagha is just..."

"Someone who has everything to gain from Halsin's disappearance." Gale shuts the book with a snap. "His untimely absence has put her in charge of the Grove – despite her evident lack of experience and popularity. Once he's back, Kagha will lose her newfound political clout. A taste of power can do terrible things to a person."

Wyll says, "You don't think...?"

"I haven't the slightest idea what Kagha might be doing in the wetlands. But I'm *very* curious to find out."

"As am I," says Astarion. "Besides, our next best option is following Lae'zel into a nest of wild Gith, and I don't fancy our chances of survival when it comes to begging mercy from hostile extraplanar murderers, frankly."

"Lae'zel seems like a reasonable woman," Gale says.

Astarion raises an eyebrow. "She does?"

"At the very least, we ought to report back to the ladies with this information," says Wyll. "If we don't stop discovering new things, at this rate, we'll start losing track of them."

The sun is just about setting when you make it back to camp. It's early evening, and you are remarkably awake. You feel more awake than you've felt in *years*. There will be a new and special kind of exhaustion waiting for you when you sleep tonight, but right now, you're buzzing with magic and near-death-exhilaration.

When you and Sunrise Tavernsong brushed death like that together, you'd both be giddy like this after. She would bring out a bottle of Esmeltar Red when you made camp, and you would take turns gulping wine straight from the bottle, like two teenagers in a field. You feel the same sense of dizzy celebration now.

The ladies, when you get back, are not impressed by your intel.

"Irrelevant," says Lae'zel. "Busying ourselves with pointless sentiments instead of focusing on our true goal: locating the nearest Crèche and using the *zaith'isk*."

"She has a point," says Shadowheart. "We're just using this place for shelter. We don't have time to stay and contribute when we have much bigger problems to be dealing with."

Lae'zel and Shadowheart seem to have spent the entire time you were away positioned on opposite sides of the camp, ignoring each other.

"I don't know if we do, really," remarks Astarion. "We've learned that the tadpoles have been magically altered, so we won't transform. What's the point of rushing?"

"The parasite must be removed. This is imperative!" Lae'zel snaps. "Our delayed transformation is fortuitous, but we would be fools to think ourselves safe. All *this* means is that time will not decide when we transform – the *ghaik* will."

"And," counters Gale, "Currently, our best shot at removing the tadpoles is Halsin."

Lae'zel scoffs. "No ordinary *istik* is capable of such a feat. The cure is mastered only by my people. This 'Halsin' is unlikely to have a grasp on such techniques."

"Will this technology even *work* on us, if we're not Gith?" says Astarion.

"You are under my watch. My people will understand my need for servants in this plane – I am certain they will cure you, but only if I ask."

"You're *certain*?" asks Gale. "*How* certain?"

Lae'zel hesitates. The answer, clearly, is 'not very much'. "Eradicating the *ghaik* infected is the prerogative of the Githyanki," she says, after a pause. "It takes priority above all other matters."

"Fantastic," mutters Astarion, "We'll know who to call if we fancy being eradicated, then."

You pipe up with, "The roads aren't clear."

"What?"

You recall the words of Rath and Zevlor. "The goblins have overrun the roads. We're trapped in here with the refugees."

"*Ch'k*," says Lae'zel, tossing her head in contempt. "Goblins are primitive creatures. These horned goat-people might be trapped here, but I assure you that *I* am not."

"Great," says Wyll, "So why don't we rest tonight and divide the work between us tomorrow?"

That makes you all look at him.

"Look," he says, counting off on his fingers. "We need to get rid of these tadpoles. We need to scout the high road to return to Baldur's Gate. Our staying here is conditional on us helping the locals, and that aside we *still* need to account for our rations and supplies. There's six of us."

"For now," mutters Shadowheart.

"Lae'zel and I can travel out to the high road tomorrow morning and try to scout out the Githyanki settlement," says Wyll, "Gale, you understood that note we found – maybe if you investigate the wetlands, you'll find some evidence of activity from either Halsin or Kagha?"

Gale strokes his chin. "It couldn't hurt," he says.

"Oh, you *must* take me along." Astarion's red eyes gleam. "I love a good ambush."

"There," says Wyll, "Both groups will keep an ear out for Halsin's location. That leaves Shadowheart and Eve to stay here, resupply, and try to help out with things."

Shadowheart's expression is extremely sour.

"Help out with *what* things?" she asks.

"You're a cleric," says Wyll, "Couldn't you offer your services as a healer?"

"I'm not that sort of cleric. You're the folk hero, *Blade of Frontiers*." Shadowheart's braid dances behind her back. "*You're* the one who gave them the impression we were here to help in the first place."

"I need to accompany Lae'zel to the high road. I've got a job to do."

Gale raises his eyebrows. "A job from *whom?* – Oh. I see." He heaves a sigh. "Of course. Your warlock patron."

"I didn't think it was that obvious," says Wyll.

He's a warlock? You look at Wyll, and he scratches the back of his neck. You recall that when you saw Wyll doing magic on the nautiloid, nothing about it had struck you as out-of-place. Because you were in *hell*. He was doing Infernal magic. That was how he'd gotten to Avernus in the first place - he'd been *invited*.

You check to see if anyone else is surprised to hear this information and confirm that, no, only you were too thick to notice. Great.

"If the eldritch blasting didn't tip me off, the sending stone in the eye socket would have. Who is your patron?" says Gale.

"Nobody you want to know about, believe me."

"Wyll, darling, you've been cavorting with dark powers this entire time?" Astarion gives him a grin.

"Can't your patron cure us of these tadpoles?" Shadowheart narrows her eyes.

"I don't think my patron is capable of helping with this, specifically," says Wyll.

"Can't your *god* cure us?" Astarion interjects. "What god are you a cleric of, anyway?"

Shadowheart bristles. "That's none of your business!"

"Enough!" barks Lae'zel.

She raises an authoritative hand, injecting her voice and movements with enough military steel to cut off the argument without question. For a moment, you worry that Lae'zel is about to refer to you as her servants again.

She surprises you instead by saying, "We need a coordinated strategy for our movements tomorrow, and this one seems sufficient. Survive and explore."

"Alright," says Wyll, "So we all agree?"

The group's attention falls on Shadowheart. The scrutiny makes her falter. you sense her conviction shrinking.

"Fine," she huffs, "But don't dawdle. Come back as soon as you've scouted the way forward."

"One more thing," says Gale.

He raises a finger.

"I don't know about all of *you*," he says, "But after the day *I've* had, I'm not going to bed on an empty stomach. It being that resupplying is currently on our yet-to-do list, we're going to have to go back to the Grove if we want to eat. Unless anyone thinks they can catch a wild boar in the next *hour*."

Wyll begins, "I'd hate to eat into their food supplies..."

"Several of those people would be *corpses* if not for us!" says Astarion. "It won't kill them to scrimp a little."

"We can simply trade," says Lae'zel. "I can contribute to their supplies, if needed."

You're surprised again by her diplomacy. Lae'zels words are rude, but she seems to have more of a finger on the pulse of things than you thought.

She unfastens a pouch at her hip and presents the contents to Wyll, who raises his eyebrows.

"Rosymorn firewine and an entire salt brick," he says, "That's a fair trade for a meal. Where did you get these?"

Gale opens his mouth, but Lae'zel beats him to the answer. "A number of other captives fell with the Nautiloid."

"*Dead* captives," adds Gale hastily.

"By the time Lae'zel was done with them, yes," mutters Shadowheart.

"And you looted them. Right." Wyll pauses. "Well... Dinner's dinner."

You wonder how many meals Wyll has found in the pockets of the recently dead. Hopefully, it's enough to get you through the next week or two. You're going to have to get your hands dirty eventually.

The whiskey and salt are received with enormous gratitude. Food, it turns out, is plentiful tonight, because someone found two sacks of potatoes and turnips abandoned on the side of the

road after the battle. Whether or not this used to be Goblin-food, you don't ask. Oil, flour, meat, and seasonings ran out weeks ago. you expect them to salt the meal, but Okta hands your offerings over to Zevlor, who immediately goes off to put them with the gold stores. They might be valuable to trade later – too valuable to eat.

Luckily, the one thing the druids produce in excess is elderberry wine of an extraordinarily shitty quality. They have barrels of the stuff, and most of the tieflings are sick of it. Understandably. It's pretty awful.

The atmosphere of the mess area is something like a canteen, something like a pub and something like an Ilmater soup kitchen. Tieflings of all ages jostle elbows as they take seats at tables and benches crafted from scrap materials. All of you adventurers have huddled into your own corner in the very crowded mess area, although you've learned that the three tieflings are sleeping in the Hollow with the others. There's no sign of the other guy. The food is breath-takingly bland.

"Come *on*, Rolan, they almost killed a child!" shouts Lia.

You were expecting to spend this meal fielding awkward small talk with your fellow tadpole-ees. Impressively, sitting in silence and watching the three tiefling siblings passionately argue is far more awkward.

"What could we have done? *Murdered* Kagha?! We don't even *know* these people!" roars Rolan.

Between them, Cal makes helpless shushing motions. "Stop shouting, both of you. Getting angry isn't helping."

"I'm not *angry*. I'm being logical. Tell that to Lia," snaps Rolan, "Throwing our lives away for a bunch of strangers—"

"We're *eating* their *food*!" she shouts. "Staying in their *homes*! They've treated us like kin and you'd rather just *fuck off with our tails between our legs* so you're not late for your stupid apprenticeship!"

"I have worked *our entire lives* for this chance!"

"How coincidental! You've been thinking of nobody but *yourself* all our lives!"

Around and around. You take another gulp of elderberry swill. Wyll listens to the argument with furrowed eyebrows, but never gets a chance to get a word in edgeways. Shadowheart stares into her too-dark wine, looking like she wants to die on the spot. Astarion (who isn't eating) is clearly enormously amused by the whole thing.

"Both of you please calm down," begs Cal, "I'm sure others don't want to listen to this."

He gestures at Lae'zel, who next to you has been shovelling down mouthfuls of vegetables like she's been starving for a week. She is obviously completely indifferent to their argument.

"What the hells do I care? It's none of their business!" Rolan turns to you, fuming. "Listening in, are you? Enjoying the show? Anything to contribute?"

Cal winces apologetically. "She doesn't have a choice, Rolan, you're shouting so loudly everyone can hear—"

You aren't drunk. You are a new, exciting kind of intoxicated, which necessitates three near-death experiences and a tadpole to the brain in addition to a plying of booze. The feeling is not unamusing, but you are also decidedly not happy. You are feeling a third, secret kind of emotion, one that involves joyless giggling and very little mental filter. "Come on, Rolan boy!" you say, speaking in an extremely normal, sober way. "You can get a lost job back, but a dead child can never get their life back."

That kind of makes both Lia and Rolan join forces again. They stare at you.

"I tried to save Jerryl, but I lost everything. At least a few children won't survive the collapse. There's only sixteen boarders this year, so my other students might have survived, but not all of them. That's to say, actually, why not go to Baldur's Gate? Fuck it. Did you know we have parasites?"

The tieflings stare at you.

Astarion gleefully refills your glass with booze.

"*They're* staying," says Lia quietly, in a tone of voice that suggests she's given up.

"I'd feel awful if we left," murmurs Cal, "We're better than this, Role."

Rolan runs his hands through his hair. His once-neat hair is frizzled.

He groans.

"Fine," he says, "A few more days. What does it matter? I'll probably be late and lose the damn apprenticeship no matter what!"

"I promise I'll make it up to you when we get to the city, you won't regret it," says Lia. "And if you get fired I'll go down there *myself* and tear Lorroakan a new one."

Rolan smiles weakly. "Thank you."

This, apparently, is a signal that the argument is over. Cal's shoulders sag with relief.

"Chin up," says Wyll, "Lorroakan may be impressed by your knowledge of practical combat magic. There's only one way to improve."

"Yes," grumbles Rolan, "Killing goblins. For my education, of course."

"You know," says Gale, picking at his stew. "You could really do better than an apprenticeship with Lorroakan at Ramazith's."

The idea is so diametrically opposed to Rolan's worldview that he just ignores it. To Gale, a wizard from Waterdeep, even the most famous Baldurian mage is probably small potatoes.

"Right, we'd better help wash up, having shouted down the roof," says Rolan.

Lia groans. "What, again?"

Rolan arches an eyebrow. "You'll give your lives for these people, but you won't *wash their dishes?*"

"Exactly. I've got to draw the line somewhere, don't I?"

"You're a twit." Rolan smirks. "Come on."

They meander off, Cal dragging behind them.

Shadowheart pushes her bowl to the side.

"Goodnight," she says simply, and follows them before anybody can say anything.

Beside you, Lae'zel makes to stand, nodding at this display of punctuality. She seems to have finished about the same time as Shadowheart, though in terms of volume she must have eaten four times as much food. Her bowl is diligently empty.

"Do not dally," she says sternly. "Drunkenness will dull your reflexes, and a smaller body size will make you prone to human alcohol."

She directs this at you specifically.

"I am not drunk," you protest, "I can handle human wine."

"You call this wine?" mutters Astarion. "I thought it was some sort of cruel practical joke."

Lae'zel smooths down her tunic and leaves.

"They left quickly," remarks Wyll.

Astarion tuts. "Didn't they? And the outside world is so very sociable. I don't know about you," he says, and gives a wild grin, "But *I'm* having the time of my life."

You nod sagely. The combination of fatigue and alcohol is probably having the same effect on Astarion as you.

"I've been worse." Gale glances about the room, eyebrows raised. "Not very *many* times in my life have I been worse, but I *have* been worse. Have you ever drank water that was cursed by an Aboleth? *Ghastly*."

"We're much better off than we were when we first met," says Wyll, "On the Nautiloid. How *did* you two meet?"

"Oh, you know," Astarion waves a hand, "I heard an odd voice, woke up on a beach... All a bit of a muddle, really."

"Astarion is omitting the part where he threatened me with a dagger. Not that I'm bitter," adds Gale, raising his hands, "But the dagger at the throat did a lot of setting the tone of our first meeting for me."

"Did I do that? Oh, yes, I did. So many things to remember in such a small space of time."

"It was Shadowheart that... well, pulled me out of the demiplane I had trapped myself in, specifically." Gale gives you a sheepish smile. "I apologise, by the way, that I failed to help you escape. Although I daresay it worked out for the best. Did it not?"

"That depends," you say, "On whether or not we die a slow death very shortly."

"Good grief, lighten up!" Astarion exclaims. "We've been given a free night to live, at least. Sunset, freedom, terrible wine. You can't really intend to waste it *complaining*."

"Why not?" you ask. "I'm very good at complaining."

"Astarion is right," says Wyll, "It's good to be alive."

Astarion claps his hands. "Oh, you *are* capable of listening to a word I say! Good man."

Wyll's lips thin. Gale catches your eye and gives you a conspiratorial, 'look at us being all reasonable over here' sort of grin.

"Besides, I don't see what's so bad about the tadpoles," says Astarion.

Gale's grin sort of crystallises in place. "Pardon?"

"I can," you tell Astarion. "I find it remarkably easy to see what's so bad about the mind flayer tadpoles, which were put in us by mind flayers."

"Bully for you," Astarion waves you off, "As long as I stay nice and untransformed like the gentleman on Nettie's table, I'm happy to look on the bright side: The *telepathy*. Haven't you noticed? It's not just the occasional involuntary flash of memory of feeling. With enough concentration..."

Gale concludes, "...You can read thoughts. Such feats are easily possible with magic, but it works nothing like the tadpoles. The psionic technique is completely different to the mechanism of a spell to detect thoughts, and has a completely different degree of... severity. I felt it on the goblins earlier."

Astarion raises his eyebrows. "You've been trying it out. I knew I liked you for a reason." You aren't sure if he's being sarcastic.

"The ability to pry in the minds of others seems a poor tradeoff for our fate as it stands," says Wyll. He rubs his stone eye as he speaks, perhaps remembering the way the tadpole was inserted into him. Even now, you can sense something small and wriggly in each of your companions, and their minds hover on the edge of your awareness like the sound of a song stuck in your head.

Come to think of it, you haven't felt a surge of psionic energy since you first met Wyll. You had assumed it was an accidental side effect, but if Gale and Astarion are right... he might have triggered it on purpose.

More importantly, any of your new companions could do it again. A group of people with no secrets free from prying psionic eyes.

A shudder passes through you.

"I should go," you say, "I need to find a musical instrument before tomorrow, or I'll be just as defenceless as I was at the gate."

"You're three feet tall and a matron, darling, I can't imagine there's an instrument invented that makes you battle-ready." Astarion gives you the sort of raucous grin that usually means 'that remark about your race was a joke, so if you mention it, you're the problem, loser'.

"What did you mean earlier," you address Astarion, "When you said, 'the outside world'?"

A flash of anger, quick as a lightning-bolt, across his face. Then the anger is smothered again, lost in the cocked eyebrow and cheeky grin. "I've never been especially interested in the countryside. Far too much nature for my tastes."

I'm a silly, sheltered young man from the Upper City, his smile sings, I have no problems and hide no secrets, and it just so happens that the room is full of things that are far more interesting than direct eye contact with you.

Interesting.

You don't really know what you're looking for until you hear it; the soft, low melody of a lute being practised from a distance. It seems as though someone is playing right next to the mess tent. you follow the sound, certain that the player is just around the corner, but it's still so faint as to be barely noticeable.

It takes five minutes for you to realise you've either developed supernatural hearing as a consequence of the tadpole, or just one day of this has caused you to fledge back into the power level you had as a teenager.

You sigh, maybe in the hopes that the music will fade, but it doesn't.

The lute turns out to be in the hands of a girl, sitting on a grassy ledge that overlooks the Hollow, who alternates bouts of confident, fluent music with sudden frustrated chordless strums and curse words. She doesn't see you as you approach. She picks up her melody from the start.

"Dance upon the stars tonight,

Smile and pain will fade away,

Words of mine will turn to ash

When you call the—

– FUCK!"

She tosses the instrument aside with an ugly twang.

"Hey," you say, as you crest the hill.

She looks up. She's less of a *girl* and more of a *woman*, you see, at least by tallfolk standards. she's perhaps nineteen or twenty, with delicate, curling horns. She makes a face, clearly expecting a friend or something, but her expression changes to curiosity as she sees you.

"It's you," she says, "From when the goblins attacked."

She's dressed in – gods, you *know* that outfit. It's one of the sewing patterns included in *Volo's Guide To The Bardic Arts*, the book that inspired your mother to take up the lute. Even your *mother* would have made adjustments to Volo's idea of a "normal bard outfit". But this one has been clearly created with so much effort and passion that you can't do anything but love it; parts of the fabric are patchworks of old garments, with patches of felt and leather among the linen. Someone had to use every bit of fabric they could get to make this, no matter what.

There's a gentle tinkling of bells as she shuffles to make room for you to sit next to her, cross-legged, hidden in the shadows overlooking the Hollow.

"Are you here to borrow a lute?" she asks. When she smiles, her nose scrunches up with amusement.

"Only if you've one spare," you answer, because with the amount of effort this girl has put into her outfit, you can't imagine the effort that might go into her *instrument*.

"This is actually a spare, the one I'm playing. It's Lihala..."

She bites her lip a moment.

"It was my teacher's," she says. "I don't need it any more. Just thought a different instrument would help with... I don't know."

She picks up the lute that she cast aside, and shows it to you. Battered, the wood scratched and pitted, the fretboard well-worn. The stings, though worn, are tight and finely tuned. This lute, like the bard's clothes, has evidently been through a lot. You pluck the strings one at a time and get back a neatly-tuned, pleasing sound.

In front of the girl is a notebook full of scribbled chords and crossed-out lyrics. Something like a final version of the song seems to emerge from her writing, but apparently not final enough.

"Writer's block?" you ask her.

"*Bard's* block. I have the lyrics, I have the chords, I just *don't have*, I don't know," she laughs bitterly, "Any talent."

You smile. "You remind me of my brother. He would always say that when he couldn't perfect a song."

She gives you a shy look. She has eyes rather like Arabella, the little girl from earlier; deep shadowy sclera, bright amber-coloured irises, her expression remarkably familiar.

"I'm Evening Tavernsong," you say, and this time, finally get the next part right: "Call me Eve."

"I'm Alfira." She crinkles her face in thought for a moment. "I... I'm sure I've heard that name. Perhaps I've heard of you!"

"Not me," you tell her, "My brother was the bard. Noonan Tavernsong. He lived in Elturel, too. Never came back from Avernus."

Her expression softens; familiar story, to her. "Oh. Is there a chance he's still...?"

You shake your head.

"I work at the Unrolling Scroll," you say, and when that gets you a blank look from Alfira, you clarify: "The Unrolling Scroll Temple, the largest temple to Oghma, the God of Knowledge, in Baldur's Gate. I'm a matron, but many of my colleagues are wizards who specialise in divination. So – we got to find out, at least."

"I'm really sorry for your loss."

"Anyway," you say, coaxing her back to the subject of herself, "You were saying something about not having any talent?"

She snorts. "And your brother used to say the same thing?"

"He was one of the best bards on the Sword Coast," you say. "He had talent in abundance. But if he couldn't perfect a song, he'd convince himself he probably didn't deserve to live, for the shame."

Alfira laughs. "Lihala probably knows – *knew* him." A little quieter. "Lihala probably knew him."

Grief. Alfira is like Noonan too, then; when he was upset, he would hide away with his lute, snapping at anybody who interrupted him that he was working on a song and that he *needed* to get it just right. All his anger and despair, pinned conveniently on one snag, one line, that didn't quite *work*.

"Lihala was a bard?" you ask.

"Yes," says Alfira, "She taught me to play. She taught me everything, really. She–"

Her voice catches.

She looks away, hugging her shoulders, turning her face so you can't see her eyes.

"Sorry," she says, and it comes out a small squeak.

You put a hand on her arm and squeeze; she ducks her head into her hands, though she doesn't sob, still, perhaps too proud with a stranger watching. Her hair, which tumbles down her shoulders and back in gentle waves, was dyed purple several months ago; she has dark roots, the purple completely absent where her horns emerge below her hairline.

When she takes her hands away again, she quickly rubs away any trace of tears.

"I'm sorry," she repeats, and sniffs. "It was— last week. Gnolls. We were trying to scout a way past the goblins, on the high road..."

Gnolls. You only encountered gnolls once, and they were two captive ones, luckily. Still, they were terrifying – vicious, crazed, violent, like a hyena crossed with an ogre, with no capacity for anything other than anger and hunger.

Alfira says, "She saved me. Told me to run, that she'd be right behind me. But there were too many of them, and it happened so fast, and— gods."

She gulps back her feelings.

"Sorry," she says, "That's a lot."

"Not at all. The song you were playing on her lute..."

"It's for her," she says, "The song. I wanted it to be beautiful, and haunting. Like she would make it sound."

You nod.

"But this... is nothing like Lihala's music. Nothing is."

"I understand," you say. "So you switched over to her lute, wondering if it would sound more like her."

Alfira passes you Lihala's lute, and from beside her picks up another. This one is clearly newer, and someone has decorated it with colourful flowers in chipped paint along one side.

"Wishful thinking," sighs Alfira, "Keep it. If Lihala heard *The Weeping Dawn* right now, she'd make me spend a week re-writing it."

"Was she often like that?"

Alfira smiles to herself. "Yes," she said. "She always pushed me. But only when I needed it. She said to never settle for less than brilliant."

"It sounds," you say, "Like Lihala pushed you because she thought you were already brilliant, and she wanted it to show."

She looks down at her lute.

"Maybe," she says shyly, and you realise Lihala had already told her.

"Can I hear what you have so far?"

She plucks the chanterelle a few times, fidgeting. "I'm not fully happy with it yet."

"Fair enough," you say. "When Noonan was stuck, I would convince him to stop working on the thing he was stuck on and just experiment, play around on our instruments with no goal, like when we were kids."

Alfira chuckles. "I don't think Lihala would agree. She was a big believer in discipline."

"So was Noonan. It was a hard sell." You pluck each of the strings of Lihala's lute, one-by-one. "I may not be much of a bard, but in Baldur's Gate, I was a matron for a bunch of the boarding school kids at the temple. Play is learning, and learning is play – kids innately understand the value of playing." Then a chord, then another; then into a melody, following the pattern that Alfira was playing when you approached her. "Play around with *The Weeping Dawn*. Sometimes, if a song gets too important, it stops being playful, so it can never be complete."

She listens to you play for a moment. You take a moment to find your swing, but you find your footing in something like Alfira's song. She just sits, eyes closed, listening, for a long moment; then she takes up her lute, and begins to pluck, gently, not her original notes but filling in the song's empty spaces. Accompanying you, as you attempt to recreate the snatch of her music that you heard.

The Weeping Dawn is gentle and thoughtful, and it *invites* the Weave more than anything. Softly at first, then all at once, your senses open to the druidic magic that runs through the Hollow. both of you playing concurrently keeps the flow of magic steady, and you feel yourself sobering up, the pain in your joints fading a little.

Another feeling, too, as you play Lihala's lute. the instrument is worn in slightly the wrong places, slightly uncomfortable to hold. The memory of Lihala's hands is strong in the worn, smooth wood. when you look closer, there are scratches, and signs the lute was cleaned recently – damaged from the battle, no doubt. You get a sense of what kind of bard Lihala was, as your fingers touch the strings that she had played to save Alfira's life, and as Alfira plays along with you. Her lute, and her student; you and Lihala occupy the same space, briefly, and that makes it easy to lose yourself in your own imagining of *The Weeping Dawn*.

You play aimlessly, Alfira's music responding and bouncing off yours. Her eyes drift away from her scribbled sheet music, away from her notebook, and at last she begins to sing:

*"Dance upon the stars tonight
Smile and pain will fade away
Words of mine will turn to ash
When you call the last light down*

*Moon, sun, all remind me of your grace
Faith, care, all the love I can't repay
Moon, sun, all remind me of your grace
Faith, care, all the love I can't repay*

*Moon reminds me of your grace
All the love I can't repay
Rest and know that I will pray
Farewell, my dear old friend."*

The lyrics pull at her voice and accent in an odd way, and you get a sense of the absent Lihala's voice, the style that Alfira was trying to copy.

You finish the last bar, and Alfira leans back her head and sighs, blissfully, as though a terrible pain has been relieved.

"Thank you," she says.

"Thank you," you tell her, "That was beautiful."

"I wanted *The Weeping Dawn* to be a sort of eulogy," she says. "Something good enough to capture Lihala, and what she taught me. But I realised that my favourite thing about learning

with Lihala was playing with her." She closes her eyes. "It was nice hearing her lute again. You sound like her, when you play."

"I'm honoured," you say, and you mean it. Then, without thinking about it: "I miss my students, too. There was an attack, and I don't know what happened to them."

It's not until you say it that you realise how true it is, how deep it cuts. for a moment, the illusion – the beautiful fantasy of being a travelling adventurer, saving refugees – abates. Jerryl, Fen, Samothy, Kaine. All the other little ones, the non-boarders and the summer students. And your coworkers – Omar, Xatheria, even Brevek – you have no way of knowing who survived. You have little choice but to hope that it was all of them.

Then ice again. Just another set of thoughts to be put aside for later, after the tadpole is gone. You shrug.

"You must have been a good teacher," says Alfira, and smiles, crinkling up her nose.

"I wasn't a teacher. I was the matron."

"School matrons have to teach some very important lessons," she says, "Even if they're not paid for it."

That makes you swell up with pride, a little. "Well, thank you."

Her bells jingle as she stands, slinging her lute onto her back.

"I should go back before Lakrissa comes looking for me," she says. "Thank you. You can keep Lihala's lute."

"Are you sure?"

"I think she'd want you to have it," she says, and laughs. "I can almost hear her ghost, wanting to go with you and not be left gathering dust with me."

"Then I'd better take it."

She waves and heads back down the slope, leaving you sat overlooking the village, alone with Lihala's lute.

"I suppose you had to adjust to starting from scratch too," you address the lute, "When Elturel fell into the hells, then again when you were kicked out for being a tiefling."

A lone bard, scouting out the high road with her student. The gnolls would only need to get lucky once.

"I don't know how you saved Alfira," you continue, "But you did a good job. I guess I lost my life protecting my student too, in a way. So we might work well together."

Lihala doesn't reply, being both absent and dead, but it makes you feel less lonely to talk to her lute, nonetheless. Maybe you're crazy. Or drunker than you thought.

"Right," you say, and give the strings a last thoughtful strum. "Lihala is a fine name for a lute."

Your mother hated people who named objects. But your mother was wrong about a lot of things.

"I'd better take you back to camp, then," you say, and you pack Lihala into Jerryll's mysterious lute-case before setting off.

Chapter 7

You have learned a couple of things about Shadowheart.

1. She opens up more easily when she's by herself. You've managed to learn that she likes flowers and little animals.
2. She's awful at buying groceries. You had to take over when she couldn't remember how to haggle, and for the rest of the morning she watched you trading for rations like you were performing a fascinating kind of interpretative dance. You asked her what kind of food she liked, and she stayed silent for a full twenty seconds before finally answering, "...Salmon?"
3. Relatedly, she worships Shar, the Lady of Loss, Mistress of the Night, she who drinks in sorrow, despair, and suffering, and drowns in the ink of total blissful oblivion till there is nothing but darkness.

"What?" you say.

At Zevlor's request, you're poking around a previously-locked ruin that he thinks might have some kind of minor zombie infestation. In addition to goblins, starvation, racism, and the Absolute, the Grove's problems also include gnolls, rumours of a hag, a nest of harpies living near the childrens' play area on the beach, and possible zombies. Zevlor kind of has his work cut out keeping everyone alive.

"I'm a cleric of Shar," says Shadowheart, avoiding your gaze, "Please don't make a fuss. So, no, this isn't a temple to Shar."

Which is what *you* get. Looking closer, the large black circle you had mistaken for the sign of the Dark Lady is actually just a hole in the wall.

"Oh," you say, "Okay."

"Or any other god that I know of."

The ruin is a once-grand stone temple that's now falling to bits. A headless statue, its plaque long-eroded, overlooks the chamber in which you are now searching for zombies. Presently, the only corpses you've found have been sealed in large, heavy sarcophagi. Shafts of sunlight through the collapsed roof make it pretty easy to see, and the place looks decidedly dead.

"I thought with the traps at the entrance—" you begin.

"*Any* respectable temple puts traps where it keeps its sacred artefacts, including its honoured dead," says Shadowheart defensively. "There's nothing Sharran about it."

The Unrolling Scroll doesn't. The cleaning ladies disabled them months ago and nobody noticed. You don't mention that.

"That's not what I meant," you say, "I mean, I thought with the traps at the entrance, Zevlor was probably wrong about the zombies."

"Oh. Um." Shadowheart looks embarrassed for a moment. "Perhaps."

"Undead can't disarm traps," you say. "You'd think they'd have been killed."

She's silent a moment longer. You worry briefly that you've thrown her off, but when you glance at her, you see she's concentrating, her eyes closed.

"I don't know," she says, eventually. "There's *something* undead here. Nothing strong, but there's necromantic magic in the air, no doubt."

Well, she's the cleric. Even if she's a Sharran one. What *do* clerics of Shar even do? Sell darkness? Commit freelance murder? Maybe they're like those Ilmater priests, and go off and lock themselves in dark rooms to seek enlightenment?

"What could it be?" you ask.

She frowns. "Maybe a cursed artefact," she says, "Or perhaps there are undead trapped somewhere deeper within."

That's pretty vague. You run a hand over a dusty sarcophagus, and your fingers leave perfect tracks in the dust.

"A death god?" you suggest.

"Not Myrkul," she says, "Or Kelemvor. Too old, and the symbology is wrong. There are stone skulls carved into some of the sarcophagi, but not the right kind to symbolise Bhaal."

You nod. All stone skulls look the same to you, but presumably that's why you're not a cleric.

I can hear Bhaal's voice. The worst part is when he's nice to me.

Imoen's words ring in the back of your mind, and you remember the yellowed letters packed into your lute-case. Shadowheart would probably know what to make of it...

...But she worships the goddess of mysteries. It would probably go against her creed to help you for no reason.

Damn.

"Here," she calls, "There's a door."

You peer around where she's pointing, but you can't see anything except shadows. Shadowheart is a half-elf, it turns out, and her vision is much sharper than yours in here. Besides, being a cleric of Shar, she can probably see in the dark.

"Hold on," you say, reaching into your pockets, "Yesterday, someone gave me a locket that makes lights."

Shadowheart squints. Maybe not all Sharrans have perfect infravision. "That would be helpful," she says, "I can't tell if there's a keyhole."

You fish around the outermost pocket of your lute-case, where you stashed Komira's locket...

...And it isn't there.

"Oh," you say.

Shadowheart raises an eyebrow. "Did you leave your belongings unattended around Astarion yesterday, by any chance?"

Damn. Astarion can sneak up on you effortlessly even while you're sober. The fact you have most of your stuff left is probably a courtesy from him.

"I suppose I'll just..." Shadowheart says, and reaches out a hand to touch the stone surface.

Every sarcophagus explodes.

Chunks of stone and marble slam batter you to the floor in a white-hot burst of pain.

The impact with the floor blurs your vision, but your sense of touch is working just fine, so you feel the cold, shrunken touch of an undead hand grip your shoulder. You don't have the breath to scream, but Shadowheart does. she gives a wordless yell of surprise as a mummified skeleton pounces onto you and *bites* you.

There's a few seconds of searing pain as the undead's teeth rip into your neck and shoulder. Ringing fills your ears. you don't hear Shadowheart approach, but you feel the impact of her mace as she batters your attacker away.

The skeleton still has the remains of its mummified skin sloughing off it. Its rotten, shrunken head has hollow empty sockets, inside of which are tiny pinpricks of blue light. Your head swims, and all you can do is watch those little dots of light. Aren't they pretty? Distantly, you're aware of your consciousness slipping, the pain wracking your body becoming more and more far away.

As though you're underwater, the sound of a yelling Shadowheart swims in your ears: "*Shit!*"

Her hand claps your shoulder, and she cries out something magical. you gasp in a breath of cold air as a healing pulse runs through your body, sewing up the worst of your wounds. Your vision clears, revealing the decrepit, lumbering undead that is currently ambling towards Shadowheart with your blood still spilling down its rotten jaw.

You don't have time to warn her, but she doesn't need it. she raises her mace in the air. "*My faith be true!*" she cries, her voice ringing with magic, and there's a flash of bright light.

The wave rolls over you harmlessly. The skeletons, on the other hand, topple to the ground in bursts of white flame. You hear the shriek of dispelled necromancy in the air.

Two clatters, as Shadowheart drops her mace and shield.

Then it's silent. The dead stay dead.

Shadowheart collapses to the ground.

You take a step forward and find yourself more or less able to walk steadily, although there's a fiery pain burning in your shoulders that slows you down to a hobble. "Shadowheart?" you call.

She's doubled over, clutching her wrist. Her face is contorted with pain, but she makes no sound, just hunches over in silent agony. She tries to gasp in a breath, then chokes, convulsing.

Your mind whirls. The matron in you immediately thinks: *is she having a seizure?* There doesn't seem to be any magic, and the hand she's clutching doesn't look injured to you. Just when you're about to touch her, she hisses out, between clenched teeth, "I-I'm fine."

She doesn't look fine. She looks like she's suffocating, red and sweaty and pained. She trembles, eyes squeezed shut. Eventually she gathers enough energy to speak again.

"I'm fine," she repeats. "This happens."

With some difficulty, she sits up, clutching her hand to her chest.

She waits a moment. Her breathing relaxes.

"I think it's over," she says, "Sorry."

You look over her body, confused. She looks completely unwounded, including her hand. "What happened?"

She sighs. She's lying near the base of the headless statue, and she shuffles backwards until she's leaning against it, using the forgotten god for support.

"Nothing," she says, then, paradoxically, "Give me a moment to recover."

You limp over and sit next to her, bringing out Lihala as you do.

You're pretty sure you didn't remember your mother's Song of Rest yesterday, but now it's fresh on your mind like you were fourteen years old again. It's most efficient when sung, but you'll have to make do with the solo lute form for now. Your shoulder aches terribly as you arrange your arms around Lihala, but you manage to get your hands onto the strings, and from there the melody works its magic.

Shadowheart closes her eyes and lets the music wash over her.

"That's nice," she says. "It sounds..."

She trails off.

Your mother's later work has that effect on people.

"Are you alright?" she asks, using her chin to point at your wounded shoulder.

"Yes. Ow." You try to touch it and your elbow gives a painful twinge.

"Here," she says, and holds out her hand. "Let me."

It takes you a moment to figure out she's offering to heal you.

"You should heal yourself first," you tell her. She shakes her head, braid dancing.

"It won't work," she says.

She taps your arm gently, and your wounds heal over into raw but bearable marks on your skin.

"Thank you," you say.

A thin smile. "Don't count on always having me around. Those things would have torn you to shreds if you'd been alone."

"That seems like even more reason to thank you."

She leans her head against the marble. "You're welcome," she says.

It's like the undead were never there. The ruin lapses back into silence.

Shadowheart seems to doze off a little.

"It's my hand," she mumbles, eventually. You glance at her.

There's still a sheen of sweat on her face. Her fingers are trembling as she opens her right hand, showing you her palm.

A single circular scar, like a coin, sits in the centre. It goes all the way through, as though a musket-ball had pierced her through the hand as a child.

"What's that?" you ask.

"The mark of my mistress," she says. "A wound that connects me to Lady Shar."

Odd church they have.

"It flares up sometimes," she says, "It's... painful. But harmless."

Painful seems like an understatement.

"Why?" you ask. Then, attempting to be religiously sensitive, "Is it good?"

She's silent for a moment.

"I don't know," she says. "I've never known. Is it supposed to be punishing me? Guiding me? Will it be important later, perhaps?"

She balls up her first, hiding the wound.

"Only Lady Shar knows," she says. "It would be unlike her to provide clarity. It's not our way. *My* way."

You nod. That makes sense. The goddess of secrecy and grief, bestowing blessings that hurt – checks out. You decide Shar must not be all that bad. Shadowheart seems normal enough, and there was no particular reason she had to save you from the undead just now, or heal your shoulder.

"Is that what your little toy is?" you ask. "A Sharran thing."

She chuckles. "It's not a toy," she says, "It..."

She trails off.

"I shouldn't tell you," she says, "Power in secrecy."

You are, admittedly, way too curious to drop it. "Then I'll keep it a secret," you say, "Power in conspiracy."

Shadowheart smiles at that, and brings out the little toy.

It's a many-sided polygon, with bright silver spines on each corner. When she flexes her hand, the polygon levitates about an inch from her palm. she flexes it again and the polygon drops. She

hands it to you. it's lighter than it looks, as though hollow, and it pulses and lurches as though something is stirring inside.

"What is it?" you ask.

"I don't know, but I know my mission revolves around it," she answers. "As for how I got it or what it's for, I can't remember. I just know I need to bring it to Baldur's Gate at all costs."

"You can't remember?"

"I am a disciple of Shar," says Shadowheart. "In dedication to my mission, I had all of my memories removed."

"Sorry, what?"

"My memories," she repeats. "I mean – the broad strokes are still there. I remember growing up in a cloister, for example. And I remember the mother superior. But as for the details, my ability to recall them has been severed by Lady Shar, so as not to distract me from my mission."

"Shar did that to you?"

"I volunteered." Her head gives one of those haughty little shakes, and her long, dark braid dances.

Come to think of it, Shadowheart is wearing a lot of black circles on her outfit. Maybe you could have guessed she was a Sharran.

"Will you get them back?" you ask.

"If my goddess wills it," she answers.

There's no doubt or hesitation in her voice. Resolute, upstanding faith, servant to master, sheep to shepherd, of the kind you only occasionally glimpse in the Avowed. The paradoxical thing about religion is that the more important in a church you become, the more self-absorbed you seem to get. The Avowed who run the Unrolling Scroll Temple are, because they are some of the most important worshippers of Oghma in the country, some of the least gods-fearing people who've ever walked Toril.

You wonder what kind of life Shadowheart might have had, that she sacrificed her memories willingly to her Goddess. Perhaps she turned to memory loss after a tragedy, as rumours say the Sharrans in Baldur's Gate provide. The cleaning girls, Dana and Laurel, are awful for this kind of gossip. Apparently Laurel's uncle's half-brother had a cousin who had a bad breakup, and she was so distraught the family paid for her to go and have the memory surreptitiously removed by Sharrans.

"But you know some things, like your name," you say.

She's quiet for a moment.

"Oh," you realise aloud. "Shadowheart is probably a made-up name. I should have guess—"

"Shadowheart is not *made-up*!" Shadowheart protests. "That's my real name. I remember *that* much."

You nod. What would you know? Perhaps Shadowheart is a traditional Sharran name for a baby girl. "But you don't remember your parents, or..."

"I didn't have parents," says Shadowheart. "...At least, not ones that wanted me. The cloister is all I've— I'd ever known."

You muse, "In that case, I suppose that memory is all you'd need, isn't it?"

"Exactly," she says firmly. "I have my creed and my duty. The specifics don't matter."

It must be nice to be so unburdened by specifics, you think. Your life is nothing but specifics. As Uncle Aonghus would say, *tis grand for some*. Not that you would especially fancy having all the details of your life on loan to Shar, goddess of silent assassination.

Shadowheart fidgets shyly with her good hand.

Your mother's voice.

Power in harmony, always. Bards worship every god.

You do owe Shadowheart for saving you.

"Then I'll keep this secret," you say, "As a tribute to Lady Shar."

It seems like the right thing to say. Shadowheart nods, her shoulders relaxing just a fraction.

"You know, with the sarcophagi exploding, I forgot about the door we were trying to open," you say.

"Oh, it opened, but it looked empty to me," she says, leaning forward to point around the statue. "It's just around that corner."

You turn to look.

Shadowheart shrieks and flings her mace into the shadows.

There's a dry *thump*.

"What the hells was that?" you say, scrambling to your feet. This time, you have the brains to grab and hold Lihala.

One final skeleton steps around the corner. He's bulkier than the others, although he's not exactly *fresher*. He seems to have died and desiccated while remaining perfectly whole, and his withered face has most of its features intact. He has some magical equivalent of eyeballs in his sockets, and he's dressed – unlike the other, mostly nude dead bodies – in a tattered set of scribe's robes.

He holds Shadowheart's mace in his hand.

Shadowheart is already on her feet. She gives a cry of magic and flings out her hand. White flames erupt at the skeleton's feet. He continues, unimpeded, to walk calmly towards you.

When the withered skeleton speaks, it's in the voice of a tired old man. Something else rings underneath; the hollow echo of a voice being produced by magic instead of flesh.

"Thy name has been recorded, daughter of darkness," he says. "I am not thine enemy, and thou hast enemies aplenty."

Shadowheart flings her shield, which clonks the impassive skeleton right in the face. He doesn't even flinch. It clatters to the ground, and he looks down at it with his withered face.

Despite the fact he is obviously completely dead, there is a hint of disappointment in his expression.

"What the hells are you?" Shadowheart demands. She has her hands raised, ready for magic. she tenses up as the skeleton approaches you, only for him to completely brush past you completely and keep walking towards her.

"Tell me," says the skeleton, "What is the worth of a single mortal's life?"

Shadowheart begins to back up. "Not a price you can afford. Not *mine*, anyway."

"Incorrect," he intones.

You pluck out a simple rhythm on Lihala's strings, but you get no sense of magic at all. No necromantic life-force, or possession, or any kind of clear magical explanation for a walking, talking zombie.

"What is the worth of a single mortal's life?" he repeats.

Shadowheart tenses. She glances over at you.

"Worth is subjective," you answer, "The buyer sets the price."

The skeleton's dry, hollow eyeballs swivel over to you.

"Incorrect," he says, "But logical."

Shadowheart says, "Worthless."

That seems to placate the withered skeleton. He stops walking. Shadowheart stares at him warily, and he calmly holds out the mace and shield. Shadowheart waits a few cautious seconds before taking them.

When this corpse was recent, he evidently was kind of a big deal. Gold filigree lines his cheekbones and forehead, and the tattered fabric of his robes was once a beautiful opalescent grey.

You say, "Who are you?" and he looks at you impassively. You try again: "What are you?"

"Inevitable," he answers.

"What do you want?" says Shadowheart.

"Our goals, for now, align. I have seen this tale written in its completion, and my participation has long been transcribed in ink."

"Sorry, what?" you say. "Our goals?"

The withered skeleton glances sideways at you. *"Not you,"* he says.

Rude! His attention returns to Shadowheart.

"I stand vanguard against forces beyond thy modest comprehension. It matters not. My purpose is not one thou needest understand; I shall provide you my assistance."

"You want to help us?" Shadowheart frowns. "Great. We'll be sure to call if we need you. Go away."

"You will not call."

"Do you have anything to say that isn't encoded in riddles?" Shadowheart snaps.

"Very little."

"Why aren't I included?" you say, a bit miffed.

The withered skeleton doesn't even bother looking at you.

"Thy name is not written. Your continued survival was a mistake."

"On whose part?" you press.

"I give you nothing."

"Thou!" you say. *"I givest thou nothing*, if you don't respect me, Mr. Withers."

Shadowheart snorts in amusement.

"I will return," says the withered skeleton. He doesn't respond to your comment.

"Well, save it until we're finished here, *Withers*," snaps Shadowheart.

You half-expect Withers to vanish in a puff of smoke or something, but instead he just walks away, calmly strolling out the ruin entrance and out of sight. He's got a gait not unlike an old man's, with a hunched back, and he walks uncomfortably slowly.

You and Shadowheart stare after him. Neither of you feel comfortable speaking until he's well out of earshot.

"What was *that*?" you say.

Shadowheart shudders. "I don't know," she says, "It felt important."

"It did?" It felt like being insulted by an unusually intelligent zombie to you.

She shakes her head. "I don't suppose it matters," she says. "No more undead here. We should leave."

"In a few minutes. Let's let Withers get out of sight first."

"Agreed."

The next item on your laundry list ("Can you check if there's an owlbear living by the river? If there is, leave it alone," Zevlor had heaved an enormous sigh at this, "Just tell me it's there and I'll mark it on the map,") brings you away from the coast, along a thin little stream that will soon become the Chionthar.

You don't find any owlbears, but you *do* find a tiefling and a dog. Your first thought is that she must be from the Hollow. She's dressed in tattered leathers that barely cover her torso. The dog is a white hound-looking thing with pointy ears, and the tiefling is crouched on her haunches, hand extended. You exchange a wary glance with Shadowheart, who shrugs, and as you approach you can hear her talking to the dog in a soft, friendly voice: "There's a good boy. Good dog. Come here, boy. Come here. Leave him. Come on, boy. Leave him."

Shadowheart glances over at you. The tiefling hasn't noticed you.

"You can talk to animals, can't you?" says Shadowheart.

"What? –Oh. Yes. I think."

"Good enough," Shadowheart mutters, and raises her voice. "Hello?"

The woman doesn't look at you immediately. she backs off a little, letting the dog relax, before she gets to her feet. You notice two things.

Firstly, she's huge. She must not have been introduced to you yesterday. you'd probably have remembered her based on her height alone. She's at least six and a half feet tall, and built just as solid and muscular. She wears an odd piece of enchanted clothing that makes her glow slightly, as though there were a fire burning in her chest.

Second: there's a dead man lying just next to the dog, which is crouched, ears flat, eyes wide, next to him.

"Hello," says the woman, her voice respectfully hush. "Good to see a friendly face. Poor guy, look at him."

Shadowheart arches an eyebrow. "The dog or the cadaver?"

"Well. Both of them, I suppose. It's the dog I'm worried about, though. There's gnolls about – I've already passed a few dead ones. They'd eat him alive." She gives a little whistle. "Come on, doggy! Come here!"

The dog gives a small, low growl. And then (although you're now reassured this is magic), you hear his voice, male and young and nervous: "Stop it! Leave us alone!"

With his standing still, you can see a collar around his neck, the kind apprentice-wizards make while they're learning to do illusions. Emblazoned with magic into the leather is the name *Scratch*.

"Scratch?" you say. "Is that your name?"

His ears perk up at that. "Who are you?" he says suspiciously.

Well. Good to know you *can* talk to animals, and you're not just crazy. "Just passing by," you say, "We're friendly. We don't want to hurt you."

Scratch settles a little. He doesn't leave his crouched position, but seems to relax a bit. "I'm glad," he says, "I wasn't sure. But you should leave soon. It's dangerous here."

"We were wondering what *you* were doing here," you say.

Scratch glances over at the dead man. His face is white, his limbs obviously stiff. You can't see exactly where the wound that killed him is, but the blood spilling down his shirt and onto the ground around him confirms it wasn't a pretty one.

"My friend is hurt," says Scratch, which is a bit of an understatement. "I need to keep him safe until he wakes up."

"I don't know if he's going to be waking up," you say. "He looks... very injured."

"He'll wake up," says Scratch firmly. "We're nearly home. Then he can rest."

Oh dear. Well. Somebody else with *less* problems can break the news to this dog. you're not interested in working through the stages of grief with a stranger, let alone a stranger's *dog*. You lower your voice and address Shadowheart and the tiefling. "He thinks his owner's still alive."

"*Aw*," says the tiefling, sounding genuinely a little heartbroken. "We can't just leave him here to get eaten by gnolls, can we?"

"I don't know if he'll leave willingly," you say.

"Can't you tell him to come with me?" she begs you. "Tell him to follow my smell or something."

Come to think of it, the woman *does* have a funny scent. She smells of something hot and sulphurous, like the smoke from a blacksmith's forge. her enchanted clothes, ragged though there are, seem to give off a sort of smoky-smelling heat. Even when she stands a few paces away from you, you can feel the heat rolling off her.

"Smell us," you say, "If you need somewhere safe to go, you can follow us. Okay?"

Scratch's tail shakes, just a few times. "Okay," he says.

"I think that's as good as it gets," you tell the woman.

She nods. The more you look at her, the less sure you are she's from the Hollow. She's clearly scarred, with a battleaxe strapped to her back; all the tieflings you saw defending the gate were obviously untrained civilians. One of her horns is broken at the base, leaving just a stub. the other is a curling ram-shaped black with sharpened points.

"Better than nothing," she says wistfully, "Bye, Scratch, Good luck. Can you tell him that?"

"My friend says good luck," you tell Scratch.

Scratch barks, his tail wagging a little. The tiefling smiles a big sharp-toothed smile.

"Gods, it's nice to meet a friendly face," she says. "There's not really a good way to ask this, but, er, bear with me here. Where am I?"

"You were there!" cries Shadowheart.

Shadowheart has been standing behind a tree as you talk to the dog, perhaps expecting it might attack unexpectedly. She's now peeking out, staring at your new friend with wide eyes.

"You were on the Nautiloid," says Shadowheart, "I remember you. But you were asleep."

The woman scratches the back of her head. "Well, I suppose that saves me some explaining," she says. "Er. Yeah. I've got a weird parasite in my head, as well."

"So do we," you say, "Here, watch this."

You experimentally reach out with your mind, trying to see if you can sense the tadpole, like Astarion and Gale said. You look at her, trying to loosen your grip on your thoughts, and then you notice it, a shape on the inside of your thoughts that wasn't there before. You try to focus on the sensation, attempt to nudge her like you nudged Wyll yesterday, and you finally grasp the shape of her mind –

BLOOD – DEMONS – HELLFIRE – SERVITUDE – YOUR HEART CRIES – YOUR SOUL ACHES – YOU MISS THE SUN – YOU HATE ZARIEL – YOU'RE SO TIRED OF FIGHTING – YOU WISH YOU WERE–

She gives a yelp of surprise. you, for your part, forget you're controlling your own body and not hers, and try to take a step only for your limbs to be completely the wrong length, cutting off your connection with her as you trip over a root and stumble. You gasp in pain, but it's not real. it's hers, a burning, searing *heat* that runs over her skin and through her veins, like a furnace that singes the inside of your skin, an preternatural fever. For a moment, you're an escaped soldier of the Blood War, a devil's servant, feeling disbelief at the beauty of the sky and the feeling of the sun, cherishing your freedom, giddy and curious; thoughts of mind flayers and tadpoles pushed to the back of your mind, problems for later, for after the novelty wears off.

For her part, the tiefling bends, resting her hands on her knees, she gives you a look of awe.

"Sorry," you manage. "Didn't think that would happen." She shakes her head.

"Six of you," she says, dazed. "There's... even more. I'm not alone."

Shadowheart glances over at you, a question in her eyes. You nod.

"You should come with us," says Shadowheart, "Strength in numbers. There might be even more survivors, even."

"I don't know if there are, soldier," says the woman. "I think a fall like that would've killed most people."

"But not you," you say, "You're from the Blood War. One of the devils' prisoners."

She grimaces. "I *was* a devil's prisoner," she says, "I'm free now. I'm Karlach – Karlach Cliffgate, from Baldur's Gate."

Karlach Cliffgate. Where have you heard that name before?

"I'm Shadowheart," says Shadowheart, before you can get there first, "That's Eve. You'd better follow us. We're..." Her lip curls in distaste. "Adventuring."

Shadowheart waits for Karlach to take the lead. Karlach, for her part, merrily turns her back on Shadowheart and starts strolling back down the path, away from the dog and his unfortunate owner.

"Adventuring?" Another big grin from Karlach. "Aces! Always wanted to try it!"

"Today's your lucky day, then." You can tell Shadowheart was *going* for sarcasm there, but the corners of her mouth are twitching just a bit too much.

"Do we know each other?" you ask Karlach. "I'm sure I recognise your name."

She gives a cheerful shrug. "Cliffgate? It's the gate on Tumbledown, near Szarr manor?"

"Oh, *that* Cliffgate. I suppose that must be it," you say, "I've passed through it dozens of times."

"Yeah? Where are you from?"

"I'm the matron at the Unrolling Scroll academy. But originally, Friendly-Arm."

"Ooh, temple job," says Karlach, "*Fancy*. What about you, Shads?"

You're certain Shadowheart will object to this nickname. She doesn't. "Baldur's Gate as well," she says simply.

"The mind flayer ship attacked the city first, before it went to the Hells," you tell Karlach.

"Can't say I'm ungrateful," says Karlach, scratching her ear. "That ship was my ticket to freedom. I'd rather turn into a mind flayer than keep pretending to be Zariel's lapdog."

"Well, even more good news," says Shadowheart dryly, "Our tadpoles aren't normal. Something about them prevents us from transforming... for now."

"Better and better," says Karlach happily. "Have you seen Bogrot?"

"The what?"

"Abandoned village overrun by goblins," she says, "Tons of supplies, too many for me to carry. Wanna have a peek? The goblins named it Bogrot. They're harmless. They told me I could go and have a look no problem yesterday. "

That seems reasonable. Karlach is almost seven feet tall and smells like a cambion bench pressing a maw demon. They probably *would* let her have a look.

With the information that Karlach is from Avernus, you're starting to think those glowing clothes aren't enchanted so much as Karlach's chest really *does* glow. You point at your breastbone.

"What's with the...?"

"Oh! Don't worry about it. Little adjustment Zariel made, while she was treating me like a *thing* she owned," Karlach snorts. She reaches up and thumbs her chest, and when she does, there's a metallic *clunk*. "Infernal engine for a heart. Makes me run pretty hot, but I survived the fall from the ship, at least, so it's good for *something*."

There's something about the way Karlach thumps her chest that reminds you of Wyll...

...Oh. You remember where you know the name 'Karlach' now.

You immediately take that information and eject it from your mind, because it's not helping right now.

"Where did you say that village was? Some food and medicine would be good," you say.

Karlach shoots you a lazy salute. "On it, soldier," she says, "Just follow me."

You know you're approaching the blighted village because of the gnome on the windmill.

At first, it just looks like a ruined windmill overlooking the town. It's only when you get closer that you really start picking out the details of the gnome-shaped lump on the end of one of the sails. That's also when the sound of screaming starts to get into earshot.

"He was *not* there last time I was here," protests Karlach. "He's new. I wouldn't have left him there."

"If he'd been on the windmill for that long, he'd probably be dead already," says Shadowheart.

Karlach wrinkles up her nose. "D'you think if I asked nicely, they'd take him down? They seemed really friendly."

"They can't be *that* friendly," you point out, "They tied a gnome to a windmill."

She leads you around the village's outer walls, heading towards a front gate that is apparently staffed by 'really friendly' guards. The forest, here, turns to bog. You can see the wetlands down the hill, the same wetlands Gale and Astarion are currently searching for any trace of Halsin. The woods are silent; just running water, rustling trees, and screaming gnome.

"We should probably walk a bit faster," says Karlach.

Shadowheart shrugs. "It's a nice day."

You try to stare at the sky.

Now, Miss Eve, says the Brevek Fraenor of your imagination, who still comes to stand over your desk and patronise you even though he might be actually dead in real life at this point. I must really bring your attention back to the fact that Wyll is going to try and kill Karlach on sight. Are we going to do anything about that?

Brevek always asks you about what 'we' are planning on doing about a problem, when what he means is 'you, with no assistance or additional pay from me'. The man hasn't done a lick of real work since he was promoted to High Loremaster. You tell the Brevek Fraenor of your imagination to piss off.

"Quiet around here, isn't it?" says Karlach uncertainly. "Aside from, er, *him*. You'd think the gobbos would be laughing or shouting at each other or something."

"How many were there?" Shadowheart asks.

Karlach frowns. "Er... fifteen? Twenty? Not that many, but not *not* that many, either."

You get a hint about the reason behind for the silence when you approach the gate and find it empty but for a large amount of blood and viscera.

"Gods *damn*," mutters Karlach. "That was fast."

"Maybe the village was abandoned for a reason," murmurs Shadowheart. "Why would an entire walled settlement be sitting here, full of supplies, until now?"

"Well, the gnome is still alive," you point out.

You enter the blighted village in silence. A dead goblin body, most of its limbs torn off, lies in a doorway; blood and stray body parts litter parts of the streets and buildings. It seems like there was carnage here recently, but the bodies, aside from little bits, are mostly gone.

The streets would be silent, but the gnome seems to have noticed you approaching, because he's switched from wordless screaming to specifically begging for help.

"*Up here!*" he wails, as though spotting a gnome tied to the end of a windmill blade is especially difficult. "*Help! Get me down!*"

The sound of the mill grinding is the only sound as you walk, heading towards the windmill but too spooked to call out and respond to the screaming man.

A dead warg, apparently with some chunks ripped off and eaten, lies in the entrance to the windmill overlooking the village.

"Gnolls?" murmurs Karlach.

Shadowheart shakes her head. "They wouldn't have left so many body parts behind," she says, "Gnolls never stop being hungry. They would have eaten everything."

When you make it to the windmill without anything leaping out at you, with the sound of the sails drowning out the silence, Karlach raises her voice and calls, "Don't worry! We're going to get you down!"

Then she lowers her voice and turns to you two.

"How are we going to get him down?" she asks. "I don't think I can climb the sails with the wind blowing like this."

Shadowheart gives her a funny look. "We can just shut down the windmill. It should have a brake."

"Oh. That's a better idea."

Investigating the base of the windmill – which reveals, *surprise*, more blood – you find a rotten door and collapsed wall, through which the windmill's rusted cogs and wheels are visible. Clambering through, there are two levers, and Karlach starts confidently heading towards one.

"Karlach!" says Shadowheart, pointing at the other. "This one says *brake*. That one says *release*."

"Oh. Not that lever?"

"No, *not* the release lever!"

Luckily, given that Karlach is built like a brick shithouse, she's more than capable of pulling the rusty brake lever. The mill grinds and screeches to a halt, with the gnome hanging conveniently at the lowest blade, upside-down.

"One of you's going to have to climb up there and untie him," says Karlach, "Hot hands. I'd burn him."

Shadowheart looks at you. You look at her.

"I could," you say, "You've got about two feet on me, though."

Shadowheart huffs. "Fine. I'll go."

All in all, you spend about ten minutes getting the gnome down and then politely not watching as he quaffs two healing potions in quick succession.

When he's free, vertical, and recovered from his general state of being *windmilled*, he brushes his hands down his jacket and walks over to you. He's a Deep Gnome, one of the few you've met; he's bald and completely clean-shaven, as is their way, with deep grey skin and light Underdark eyes. He's the first normal-sized person you've met in a couple of days, being a respectable three feet tall, and handsome in a sort of exotic way. For a man who was just untied from the end of a windmill sail.

"Right," he says, sounding as dignified as he can, "What is it you want? Money? Information? Or is my humiliation enough payment for you?"

"Um," you say.

"I mean, that's how this works, isn't it?" he says, frowning, as though you're a little slow on the uptake. "You laugh at my misfortune, rescue me, then extort me?"

Actually, now that you think about it, one of the only *other* Deep Gnomes you met told you that Deep Gnomes are rather pessimistic as a culture, as a consequence of living in the Underdark and being neither servants of an evil god or preternaturally powerful. It's just, quote, *not a very happy place*. And, sure enough, this is not a very happy gnome.

"We're not going to extort you," you tell him, "You're free to go. Or come with us, if you like. We're adventurers, there's a safe place—"

"No, thank you. Far too busy." He crosses his arms. "Well, I won't keep you—"

"Wait!" says Shadowheart. "Answer a few of our questions first."

"Ah, my apologies. I had interpreted 'you're free to go, without extortion' as truthful. I'm rather new to this business, myself. Please, don't let me stop you interrogating me. It's not like I have anything important to be doing."

Karlach mutters, under her breath yet not at all quietly, "No need to be a tit."

"What killed all the goblins here," you say quickly, "And should we be watching out for it?"

To say that the gnome's expression becomes concerned would be inaccurate. His expression is already worried. He looks like the kind of man who last experienced a worry-free moment somewhere in his boyhood. Nonetheless, the lines of worry in his face deepen for a moment.

"Spiders, mainly," he says, and jerks a thumb at one of the village's ruined houses. "They went poking about in the ruined apothecary and set off a veritable explosion of Thayan magic. Clearly, *someone* left behind a surprise for any intruders. Spiders and a couple of undead, to boot. Serves the bastards right for tying me up here, frankly."

The Red Wizards of Thay appear frequently in the *Gazette*. If the newspaper is to be believed, the Thayan wizards are necromancers who with a minor focus in pointless malevolence and evil. They amass armies of the undead first, and then presumably run the country of Thay in their spare moments while they're not busy. Your knowledge on them isn't exactly comprehensive, but you and your mother raided enough Thayan tombs to give you a basic idea of what their magic means.

"How can you tell it's Thayan magic? The Avowed should have come and dispelled the place years ago," you say.

He gives a snort of contempt. "The Avowed would likely lose their faith if they had any idea how much illegal magic happens in the countryside. And, if you must ask, I know it because I am an *artificer* – Barcus Wroot, inventor and enchanter, workshop off Rivington main square, Baldur's Gate."

His chest puffs up. Evidently, the urge to show off his expertise overtakes his urge not to say much to you.

"To anyone with an eye for enchantment, this village is truly *blighted*. There's a chasm to the Underdark somewhere under this village, which was used to anchor the undead and the phase spiders to a pre-written runic necromantic program, an obvious hallmark of Thayan magic – of course, very few *mages* would be able to tell you that. And, to answer your question – *yes*, I think there are obvious reasons you should be watching your back, and you should hardly need me to tell you that, but nothing's going to jump out at you as long as you leave quickly. I'd keep out of that basement if I were you."

"Thank you, Barcus Wroot," you say, "That's all we wanted to know."

Barcus Wroot nods. He licks his lips nervously, glancing up at Karlach and Shadowheart as though he's certain there's some trick coming; when none of you make any move to murder him, he says, "Right. Well. Thank you for rescuing me, I suppose. I don't... suppose I could ask a few questions of you in return, then."

"Shoot!" says Karlach. Barcus gives her a blank look. "I mean, fire away. Ask. What can we do you for? We're adventurers for hire, you know. You need help with something?"

Barcus, for his part, seems at a loss for words, even though this was surely one of the answers he was expecting to perhaps hear. It takes a moment for him to continue.

"...My... a *friend* of mine has gone missing," says Barcus carefully. The word is weighted far, far, far too carefully for it to be the case that they're just friends. "I'm tracking down an organisation that I believe might have something to do with it. The local goblins appear to have been manipulated into working for them."

"Manipulated how?" you ask.

Barcus sighs. "That's what I was trying to learn when they caught me. They have an encampment to the north of here, in the ruins of an old Selûnite temple, where they're receiving orders from some outside force. But I know almost nothing – barely even a name. They're a cult, and they're called—"

"The Cult of the Absolute," you say grimly.

"Yes!" For the first time since you've met him, and perhaps for the first time in a long time generally, Barcus lights up. "They emerged in Baldur's Gate a few tendays ago. I don't know who they are or what they want, I just... have reason to believe they took Wulbren. I managed to track them this far, but..."

"Eve," interrupts Shadowheart. "Can I have a word? In *private*," she adds, pointedly, at Barcus.

You leave Barcus in the maybe-capable hands of Karlach and step aside. Shadowheart, for the sake of privacy, has to kneel to mutter in your ear.

"Eve," she mutters, "We both know we don't have time to help him."

"Agreed."

"But before we reveal too much... nothing about the tadpoles or the Absolute. Let's not go flaunting everything we know about this to anyone who asks. Withers was right – we have enemies. We don't know who we're dealing with, and this information is a resource might need."

You glance over at Barcus and Karlach. Karlach, like Shadowheart, is kneeling, although she's still a few heads taller than Barcus. She's pointing at her chest, where the Infernal Engine is, and Barcus is stroking his chin, thoughtful.

"Do you think we can't trust him?" you whisper.

"We can't trust *anyone*. It's safer that way," says Shadowheart, "Not until we know what everything means, and what role *we* play."

She's got a point. You probably *shouldn't* trust that Barcus is sincere – hells, he doesn't even seem that *nice*. But there's something heartfelt and genuine at the core of him, you're certain; it's just the impression you get. And you have some sympathy for missing person cases, admittedly.

"Let's feed him just the one nugget," you say, "To stop him suspecting we're hiding anything. Moonrise. Give him a lead on his friend, no more."

Shadowheart looks... oddly relieved. Did she think you would resist? "Good idea."

Karlach and Barcus seem surprisingly absorbed in their conversation.

"...wouldn't trust anyone without experience, and even if I knew an artificer who could, they'd want to be a tiefling or genasi of some sort to handle the materials safely," Barcus is explaining, "It'll take either materials or an engineer with Infernal magic, ideally both, and any work you have done on *this* plane won't last nearly as long as it would in the Hells. In an emergency, I believe the Gondians would probably be the most likely candidates."

"Worth a shot. But thanks, mate, good to know," says Karlach sincerely, "I'll keep looking."

The machine she has for a heart, presumably. If anyone would know anything about that, it would be an artificer.

"About the Cult of the Absolute," you say. Barcus raises his bald eyebrows. "We don't know very much – probably no more than you."

"But the information has a price," he says warily. "Yes. I understand. I don't have much– "

"No," you correct him, "It's just that we've only heard that there's a cult around here and that they're going to a place called Moonrise. Do you know what that means?"

He hesitates.

"No," he says, "But I can find out. Moonrise. ...Right you are. Er, if you're adventurers-for-hire... My friend, Wulbren... I don't suppose you're available to...?"

"We'll keep an ear out for Wulbren," you tell him, "But we can't go with you. We've got too much business here."

He nods. "Of course. Right. Silly thought, really. No, I shall be quite fine by myself. I... I suppose that's that, then. Moonrise. That's my next lead. Thank you."

"One more thing," you say. "When you were searching for him, did you learn anything about the whereabouts of a druid named Halsin?"

Barcus frowns. "Not specifically," he says, "But the goblins have been in a spate of kidnapping and imprisonment recently. They raid and capture travellers all over the road, it seems. No deep gnomes among them, as far as I've heard, and nothing about any druids, but I know one of their victims is a Grand Duke."

"A *what?*" Karlach repeats in disbelief. "What, from Baldur's Gate? *Here?* Kidnapped by *goblins?*"

"So it would appear. The goblins boasted plenty about it. Of course, none of the brutes are intelligent enough to know *which* Grand Duke. They took him to the old temple, along with all their other prisoners."

"Noted," you say. "Thank you, Mr. Wroot."

"I'll bid you farewell, then. If we should ever meet again..." He shrugs. "...Then we will have met again."

That's it. He adjusts his ragged sleeves, nods, and immediately walks off without a glance backward. He hops the wall behind the windmill and vanishes from sight, heading off into the woods to do whatever important business he has.

"Thayan necromancy and spiders, then," says Shadowheart, "That's good to know."

"Let's not fuck with that!" says Karlach cheerfully.

"Agreed," says Shadowheart. "Back to our list of chores, then – we're supposed to be looking for an owlbear."

"Owlbear? Aw!" Karlach's eyes go round. "I've always wanted to see one."

"Why?" you ask. "They're incredibly dangerous."

"Yeah, but... they've got owl faces. On bear bodies." She sighs wistfully. "And they're fluffy."

"They kill and eat people on sight, I'm pretty sure," you say.

"What a way to go." Karlach sounds no less wistful at all.

You make your way back through the ruined village. You linger a few paces behind Shadowheart and Karlach, and as softly as you can, hum a single note. You feel it twang gently off the apothecary's haunted basement, where the Thayan magic presumably still rests.

There is definitely an Owlbear; the tracks are obvious. The large talon-footed pawprints would be enough evidence by themselves. Unfortunately for you, in addition to the pawprints, you also stumble on another piece of evidence about the owlbear: you find it in the middle of killing someone.

It's clearly been quite the match – the owlbear is missing an eye and has the shaft of a spear sticking out the shoulder – but by now, it's too late to save the man the owlbear is currently tearing the guts out of. Watching in horror, a young man and woman hold each other, barely armed.

"Stand back and I'll show you I survived all those demons," says Karlach, cracking her knuckles. "Let's cook with fire, baby."

From inside Karlach's chest comes a low, rumbling *WHIRRRR*. What you thought might have been metal piercings scattered across her shoulders begin to belch smoke and steam as the orange glow in her chest intensifies. you feel heat rolling over you as the sound grows, and you see Karlach panting, a sheen on her face.

"Are you alright?" you ask.

"Just getting warmed up. Literally! Watch this!"

She cracks her knuckles and gives a grunt of exertion. her shoulder-valves shoot off hissing sparks of flame. There's a belch of sulphurous smoke and an unhealthy sounding click in her chest. the engine's steady sound becomes a broken, irregular chug.

It doesn't seem to bother Karlach. Her voice is booming with unnatural energy as she takes a breath and shouts, "Hey! Ugly!"

The owlbear turns away from its victim with an angry screech and Karlach simply runs straight towards it, her battleaxe untouched on her back and looking terribly exposed in her flimsy scorched leathers.

The Owlbear brings its weight crashing down on Karlach, and there's a sizzle and a burning-hair smell as she catches it and wrestles it like a hog being taken to the market. Certain that this owlbear will be eating two and not just one fresh corpse today, you re-arm yourself with Lihala

(a task you're getting faster and faster at doing) and raise your voice over the wrestling combatants.

"She's fire! She's might! You picked a losing fight!"

Karlach throws back her head and gives another of what can only be a barbarian's roar, a wordless scream of exhilarated fury, and her valves give off a burst of fiery sparks. The fire sends the owlbear cringing backwards, and Karlach takes advantage of the motion to completely topple the owlbear. She tosses it to the ground onto its back, and before it can right itself Karlach is ripping her battleaxe from her back and slashing it down the middle.

There's a gory spatter of blood. Karlach cleaves an enormous, fatal gash into the owlbear's exposed belly, and it gives a strangled, keening shriek before flopping to the ground.

Karlach gives it one more whack to the face, nearly cleaving the head from its body. then she pulls her axe from the body, blood dripping down her front and hands, and looks over at the man and woman. They're staring at her absolute terror.

"Don't worry," says Karlach, and shoots them a thumbs up. "It's dead!"

This does nothing to help. The man, woman, and mangled dead body are all dressed in matching outfits. around their necks are signet-necklaces made of cheap conjured silver, each emblazoned with a dripping red handprint. They're a bit similar in the face, too; cousins, maybe, or a brother and sister.

The surviving pair stare blankly at the dead owlbear, then at you. They back off, obviously cowering, saying nothing.

Shadowheart is silent. She stands over the remains of the man and the owlbear, frowning.

"He's still alive," she says.

"He looks pretty dead to me," says Karlach.

"But his mind – can't you feel it?"

You focus your mind. By now, reaching for the tadpole is like stretching an odd new limb; it relieves some strange pressure you didn't realise was there. As you *squirm* your concentration towards the dead man, you realise Shadowheart is right. There's a glimmer of life there. a fourth mind, a door on the inside of your skull where the brother and sister are just blank walls. You can sense a low, dormant terror. His mind, in sleep, is begging for help.

Shadowheart frowns, reaching down. For a moment, she looks a little as though she might kiss the dead, bloodied man. As she bends closer, her frown deepening, she gives a sudden yelp and scrambles backwards.

You spot it; a small, squirming thing that pokes its way out of the dead man's eye socket and starts wriggling towards the ground. Shadowheart stares at it, horrified, as it crawls off the dead man's face and starts inching its way towards her. It's shaped like a giant caterpillar, the colour of a maggot. That's as much of a look at it as you get before Karlach slams her boot into it.

You feel the door wink out of existence. The sense of helpless, unconscious fear vanishes.

"Yuck!" says Karlach, and brings her foot down again for another emphatic stomp, squashing the caterpillar into a messy red stain. "Blech! Gross! What the fuck was that?!"

Not a person's mind at all. a mind flayer tadpole. You feel a little sick.

Karlach, unbothered, gives the tadpole one more stomp for good measure.

"You," whispers the man. "You fell from the ship."

Karlach looks over at him. He's got a trembling hand extended, pointing. Not at Karlach, but at Shadowheart.

"That's it," he says, "That's the artefact. The one Ed was looking for."

Shadowheart has her hands cupped to her chest. *Was she holding it? you think. If it's a secret, then you'd think she'd have it hidden away somewhere!*

The man licks his lips. "Give us that," he says. "We need it."

"I don't know what you're talking about!" Shadowheart snaps. "Who are you? What were you looking for?!"

The man doesn't seem entirely sure of what he's saying. The woman doesn't look like she's understanding a word of what's being said. They've got the furtive, unhinged look in their eyes that you've seen before in the traveller's-dust addicts that live under the bridges at Wyrms Crossing; something wild and desperate and not entirely lined up with reality.

"For the Absolute," whispers the woman. "It belongs to her."

Karlach cracks her knuckles. She rolls her shoulders, straightening her back, and takes a step towards the two.

"Tell me who the Absolute is." Her voice is suddenly devoid of warmth. She towers over them, blood dripping down her front, eyes burning.

The man draws a shortsword from his belt.

"I'll kill you," he says, voice trembling.

"You don't wanna fight me, mate," growls Karlach.

He obviously doesn't. Karlach takes a step towards him, her chest rising and falling with growing fury. He holds his sword out to protect his sister, who has her hands raised, ready to spellcast.

Karlach's whirring engine gives one last belch of sulphurous smoke, then quietens from a roar to a slow purr. Karlach's shoulders lower.

"Forget it," she says. "We're not giving you anything. Get out of—"

The man darts towards her, bringing the sword swinging up for a surprise strike as his sister cries out a spell that makes his sword shimmer with energy. He drives the tip of his sword directly into Karlach's chest. There's a metallic *clunk* as his sword glances uselessly off Karlach's mechanical breastbone, leaving him off-balance a moment.

Karlach, unstabbed, takes advantage of the man's momentary surprise to slam the flat of her greataxe against his skull.

He stumbles back against his sister, his shortsword clattering to the ground, and Karlach smacks him again with the butt of her battleaxe's handle, a precise strike against his temple that topples him over like a bowling pin. he collapses against the woman, inadvertently pinning her to the ground, and Karlach raises her foot and kicks the woman hard in the face. *Crunch*.

The Absolutists bleed silently into the dirt.

"What was *that*?" says Shadowheart, hands to her chest. "Why were those people...?"

For a Sharran, Shadowheart is doing an incredibly bad job being subtle. Obviously, the couple were looking for the artefact cupped in her hands, the one she can't remember the purpose of.

"They didn't look all there to me. They've got that sort of... fog. Like when someone's been charmed." Karlach frowns. "D'you think they had tadpoles, as well? It doesn't feel like it. They don't feel like you two, in my head."

"That parasite..." Shadowheart's already pale face is even paler. "It must have been manipulating them. And us. It made itself seem... alive. And helpless. I almost picked it up."

"Even if it's a baby, it's still a mind flayer," you say. "Psionically manipulating people is what they do."

Karlach points at her own skull. "You hear me in there, mind flayer baby? Don't get fucking cozy."

"Well, at any rate, the owlbear is dead," you say. "Zevlor will probably want to know about the cultists, too."

"That just leaves the harpies on the beach," says Shadowheart. She discreetly puts the artefact away, out of sight.

Karlach says, "There's an awful lot happening here for a bit of the middle of nowhere, isn't there?"

"This is what living in the countryside is like," you say. "There's a reason I moved to Baldur's Gate."

"What, things are trying to constantly kill you?" says Shadowheart.

"Not if you're proactive about killing them first," you say. "Let's go back to the Grove."

Karlach is a huge hit in the refugee encampment. Apparently, enough of them were drafted into the Demon War that they had heard of Zariel's legendary warrior, who survived ten entire years of fighting in the Hells. (Looking at Karlach's face, and listening to her speak, you're certain she must have been pretty young when she started – tieflings age like humans do, so ten years is probably most of her adult life.) She turns down no less than four offers to share someone's food and tent.

"So many tieflings in one place," Karlach remarks to you, "It's like being at one of my mum's family reunions or something."

The knowledge that there are cultists, a talking skeleton and a cursed village all shortly nearby does not surprise Zevlor in the slightest. He sighs.

"Thank you," he says, although you don't know what he plans to do with this information except lose sleep over it.

The kids are over the moon with Karlach. They're even happy to show her around their secret base, which is a large damp cave full of wood scrap, and point out their secret doors to her - explicitly not to *you*, though.

"Karlach said she was going to keep it *double* secret, so you'll never know!" says Silfy, dancing gleefully at Karlach's side. Karlach is constantly ducking and dodging to stop the children

touching her, and so far she hasn't so much as brushed one. the adults, on the other hand, feel the heat of her engine and take a pace or two back.

Karlach holds up her hands. "Sorry, soldier. Double secret."

Even Mol gives Karlach a disinterested nod. This is the highest honour a preteen of her status can grant.

"So," says Arabella, sitting on a rotten crate, "If you're adventurers, does that mean you kill people?"

"Not if we can help it," you tell her.

She frowns, unimpressed. "Goblins?"

"Goblins are people," you tell her.

"Zombies?"

"They're not really people anymore."

"Did you kill any?"

"Yes," you admit.

"Cool," she says. "I raised a zombie last night."

"No you *didn't*," sneers Mattis. "She's fibbing."

"I did!" insists Arabella. "I made a zombie flower!"

"That's made-up. Everyone knows zombie flowers are *made-up*," says Silfy.

"They're not! It's the Idol I touched. It did something to me! I'm not fibbing!" She's clearly more indignant about being embarrassed in front of you than she is especially concerned about raising the dead.

"If you wanted to do something useful," says Mol, addressing you from the top of the muddy boulder that serves as her throne. "You'd steal their Idol yourselves. That'd stop Kagha."

Arabella's mother, Komira, must have been right about Mol. she'd put Arabella up to the task. You put your hands on your hips. "I don't remember you being there when Arabella took the fall for you last time," you tell her.

"All right, teach, mind your own business!" Mol flips you a rude gesture. "I did more than what *you're* going to do if you let Kagha do her ritual and kill us all!"

"And where did you learn the ritual was going to kill you all?" you ask.

"Why else would Kagha be doing it? She wants us all dead. Rath said to Kagha that Halsin would never let her do the Rite of Thorns." Mol juts her chin scornfully. "I know what that means. I'm not stupid. It happened back home too."

"They said they were going to clean us," says Silfy.

"They said they were going to *cleanse* us," Mattis corrects her. "That's what they say when they mean they're going to kill you."

You're pretty sure the Flaming Fist have threatened the homeless kids back home with similar *cleanliness*. They let the beggars at the Wide stick around in the mornings, but when the afternoon shopping crowd comes, any vagabond who's still visibly destitute gets dragged and tossed back through the gate to the Lower.

"She's got a point. Kagha could be planning to kill them," says Shadowheart. You and Karlach both give her disapproving looks, and she shrugs. "What? It's not unheard of for ritual sacrifice to play a role in Druidic magic."

"Try not to give the kiddos too many ideas about it," mutters Karlach.

Shadowheart, suitably chastised, blushes. "W-well, they've already got the idea, it seems."

"When did they say this?" you ask Mol.

"I don't know. Why are you talking to me?" she sneers.

Apparently your matronly ways are winning you no favours with her. That's fine with you. you can't imagine Mol gets along with any adult that sensibly treats her like a child.

"Zevlor told us there were harpies by your beach," you tell her.

"I know," she sniffs. "We killed 'em with rocks."

Well. That solves that.

As you guide her through the encampment, showing her the places Bex and Danis showed you yesterday, Karlach is practically dancing. The novelty of being alive and free, it seems, hasn't worn off a bit. she frequently looks up at the sun, as though unsure it'll still be there, and smiles to herself when it is. Being a minor celebrity among the tieflings of Elturel, she gets a lot of waves and smiles, and each one seems to tickle her more than the last.

You really need to warn her about Wyll, sooner or later. But you'd *really* hate to burst her bubble.

"I heard the blacksmith was in the hells too!" says Karlach. "He might be able to fix the old blood-pumper."

Karlach's engine has been continuing to give off the odd clunk or clicking sound. You wonder if having her engine serviced is a normal part of her health routine.

You follow the sound of hammering to the blacksmith's tent, where the smith in question has been cleaning and repairing a generously large amount of weaponry and armour looted from dead goblins. He puts down his hammer when he sees you enter with Karlach in tow.

He's small for a blacksmith. His arms and upper body are well-muscled, but he has the lean figure of a man who exercises a lot but doesn't eat enough to fill the space between his muscles. His square jaw and cheekbones jut out a little. Karlach absolutely towers over him, but he doesn't bat an eyelid at any of you, just nods in greeting.

"I can guess why you're here," he says. "Zariel... got you as well, then."

"Fraid so," says Karlach. "Er - I'd shake your hand, but I'm running a little hot right now."

Karlach's pipe-studded shoulders, even when she's staying still, make the air ripple around her. It's hard to tell with the tents, but it seems likely Karlach would rapidly heat up any room she stepped into. Then again, you notice Dammon doesn't seem to have a pair of blacksmith's gloves. Fireproof hands, you suppose.

"Quite alright. I'm Dammon, I was in the forges. I suppose we never crossed paths, but I'm familiar with the model." He nods at her chest. "Worked on a few Infernal Engines, in my time."

"Thank the *gods!*" Karlach's eyes sparkle. "I've always been hot, but never *this* hot. And it keeps making these weird noises. Could you fix it? Turn it down a bit, maybe? I'm too hot to touch – have been for years – and I'm *desperate* for a hug."

Dammon rubs his chin. "That depends on what the issue is. Mind if I take a look?"

"Are you joking? Be my guest!"

Dammon's eyes only drift to the engine once Karlach nods. For a moment, you wonder if you should step outside – is Dammon going to *open* Karlach? Is that private? – but instead, after carefully examining it, he places his ear as close to her chest as he can without touching her and closes his eyes. He hovers there for a second.

"You're burning up," he murmurs.

In the quiet tent, with nobody speaking, you can clearly hear the hum of Karlach's mechanical heart. It has a gentle drone, like that of a bee or a steadily blowing wind. This soft sound, you note, is nonetheless something like the loudness of Karlach's bardic presence. Magic, though no kind coherent to you, thrums in it.

"...Hm. Yes." Dammon straightens up. "Well... the good news is that I know what the problem is."

Karlach brightens. "Yeah?"

"Well, from the sounds of it, it's a metallised demonovalve engine, but I can see it's got a ra-gnax alloy casement," he says. You see a blank look beginning to spread across Karlach's face. "The heat produced by the infernal processes in the combustion chamber is too high to be contained by the insulative power of—"

"Dammon, mate, I don't know what any of those words mean!" Karlach waves her hands. "Can you put it in idiot terms?"

"Ah – sorry. I think I could fix the engine's power, at least, although I don't think I can do anything about the heat. The faulty engine part would be relatively easy to replace. That... brings me around to the bad news, which is that in order to make one, I'd need to make it out of infernal iron."

"Is it hard to find?"

"Out here? Yes," says Dammon. "It's relatively common in magic armour and weaponry, but it's expensive and hard to transport."

"But..." Karlach is still smiling. "If I do find some, you could tune me up?"

"I'd be happy to. Any infernal iron you can find will do – infernal weapons, armour, things like that."

"What's the difference between normal iron and infernal iron?" says Shadowheart.

"The sound, mainly," says Dammon, "Infernal iron tends to...whisper. Soul Coins do, as well. I think the engine has a slot for them."

"What's a Soul Coin?" you ask.

Dammon and Karlach exchange looks. "You don't wanna know," says Karlach.

"Whispering metal, at any rate," says Shadowheart. "We can keep an ear open for that, I'm sure."

Shadowheart seems much more generous about helping Karlach than you expected. Maybe she just really didn't like Barcus Wroot.

"By the way," says Dammon. "Infernal iron is extremely frowned upon by druids, so try not to let them see you with it. ...How *did* you convince the druids to let you stay?"

"We stopped asking them," you admit. "Zevlor says they don't actually keep track very well."

"Sounds about right." He scoffs. "If you can believe it, before Halsin vanished, this place was extremely welcoming to visitors."

"Maybe they were *too* welcoming, considering how Kagha's being now," you say.

"Even Kagha was kind to us at the start, you know," says Dammon.

That gets your attention. "She was?"

Dammon nods. "It's only been a few tendays, but her attitude did a sudden about-turn just after Halsin vanished. I wondered what happened."

"What was she like before?"

"I thought she was shy," said Dammon. "Said very little, eagerly agreed with everything Halsin said. I thought she was intimidated by him, maybe." He smiles grimly. "Then Halsin was gone, and suddenly Kagha turned into... *that*."

"From being Halsin's yes-man to killing children with vipers," says Karlach. "Takes all sorts."

Shadowheart scoffs. "Some people need just a drop of power to bring out their worst qualities."

Neither Shadowheart or Karlach seem especially surprised by this. But you certainly are. you're the only one who's *met* Kagha, and absolutely nothing about her struck you as timid. Social incompetence, masquerading as shyness?

"Can I do anything else for you?" says Dammon. "Repair anything, get you anything?"

"We don't have a lot of money to spare," you admit.

"No charge. There's not much point angling for profit out here. it's payment enough that you're helping us survive, I say."

He shows you a weapon-rack made of carved wood, which contains a hodgepodge of different weapons. All different materials and qualities, clearly scavenged but intact and polished like new.

"You don't seem armed," he says gently. "Take a sword, just in case something happens to your lute. I insist."

You hesitate, but then you remember how uselessly unarmed you were at the gate and decide to take a plain-looking dirk. It's a small blade for someone the size of Dammon, but long enough compared to the length of *your* arms.

"You sure you don't want any gold for that?" says Karlach. "I've got a few coins in my pocket." Where Karlach's pockets are located on her outfit, which is mostly scorch marks and buckles, you're not sure.

"No need. Payment for services is a luxury for the rich. we help each other survive out here." Dammon gives you a nod and a smile. "See you about."

Karlach is in a better mood than ever as you leave Dammon's tent.

"What a nice guy!" she says. "And did you hear that? He might be able to fix the heat!" She beams. "I could shake your hands! And hug people! And have *sex*! Gods, I miss sex."

"You need to find some infernal iron first," says Shadowheart. "I doubt we'll find much here, but there's probably plenty of it in the city if we don't."

"This is the best day I've had in years," says Karlach happily. "I don't think anything could ruin this. Not even a mind flayer."

Wyll and Lae'zel aren't due to come back for a couple of hours. And surely Wyll will change his mind. He seemed to think Karlach was a devil. He'll probably be relieved to be wrong. Right?

You're surprised at how quickly you've gotten accustomed to being here. Walking back to the campsite feels like returning home after a day's work. Karlach declares the place "fantastic" and immediately heads towards the stream. She takes off her boots, leaves them by the bank and immediately wades in, the water hissing and steaming as it makes contact with her skin.

"I love the rivers here! Fuck the River Styx forever!" She splashes joyfully through the water. "I haven't been home in so long!"

"Karlach seems happy," Shadowheart comments. You can hear her suppressing a giggle.

You nod. "I'd be happy as well, if I'd been in the Hells for ten years and then been set free."

"I don't know. If it were me, I don't think I'd know what to do with myself," says Shadowheart. "Certainly not go and play in a river."

"I'd play in a river if I was running as hot as Karlach," you say.

A steady flow of steam rises from the water around Karlach as she washes the owlbear blood off. When she's done, she sits down in the water, clothes and all, sending plumes of steam into the air.

"It's a bit like the Hissing Stones," you remark.

"What's that?"

"You know, the bathhouse." You say. She looks blank. "...The famous bathhouse in Baldur's Gate? It's in the Upper City?"

"If I've been, I don't remember," says Shadowheart. "But I don't think I've ever been to a bathhouse. I don't think I spent much time in the city at all. It would hardly be a place for Sharran activities."

"You'd be surprised," you tell her. "It's traditional for important deals to be negotiated at the Hissing Stones. No weapons, so no threats."

"Hah!" Karlach calls. Steam is rolling off of Karlach's shoulders. You see Shadowheart stiffen, but luckily, if Karlach heard anything about Shar she doesn't mention it. "Who needs the Hissing Stones when you've got the Hissing Karlach?"

You walk to the edge of the stream, which is only a foot or two deep, and swirl your hand in the water. Hot and cold currents rush past your skin. Shadowheart follows you, kneeling on the bank.

"Fancy a dip?" says Karlach.

"I can't swim," says Shadowheart. You notice her rubbing her scarred hand absentmindedly.

"You don't need to! That's why it's called a dip!"

Shadowheart removes her boots too, placing them neatly next to Karlach's, and shyly dips her feet into the water. "It *is* like a bathhouse, a bit," she says, and gives a little self-conscious giggle, as though someone is going to reprimand her any second.

Karlach cups a handful of water and throws it over her face and hair. The water continues to hiss on contact; her hair seemingly begins to dry as soon as she's not actively keeping it wet. In fact, all of Karlach seems to burn dry almost instantly, apart from the parts that are submerged in water.

When she's done, Karlach flops onto the grass. The valves on her upper body hiss as the water burns off of her shoulders, steam rising from her as she stretches.

"I could do this forever," she says happily.

That's how Wyll and Lae'zel find you, when they return early and sneak up without you noticing.

"Eve, Shadowheart!" Wyll calls. "Room for one more? You'll have to introduce me to your...new...friend...here..."

The words rot and die on his lips as Karlach stands up with you.

Wyll and Lae'zel are just a few paces back. They both look fairly bloodied, Wyll moreso than Lae'zel; blood and scratches mark Lae'zel's plate armour, while Wyll has a bloody scrap of cloth tied as a makeshift bandage around one arm. Wyll's good eye takes in the glowing chest, the missing horn, of Karlach Cliffgate.

There is no way on Toril he doesn't recognise her.

Karlach, seemingly untroubled, gives a little wave.

"Wyll, Lae'zel," you say, keeping your face and voice perfectly nonchalant, "This is another survivor from the Nautiloid we found. She was one of Zariel's prisoners, originally from Baldur's Gate."

"How you keeping?" she says. "I'm Karlach."

Wyll draws his blade. The sound rings in the peaceful air. Shadowheart takes a step back. Lae'zel glances at Wyll, frowns in confusion, and puts a hand on the hilt of her sword in a way that could be described as vaguely supportive.

"You're no Baldurian prisoner," says Wyll. His face and voice are curiously blank.

"Oh, fuck me!" Karlach groans. "You're the Blade of Frontiers, aren't you? I thought I'd lost you in Avernus!"

"My sources tell me you're Zariel's attack dog. A killer who's vicious and out of control, and trying to get to Baldur's Gate and sow chaos."

Karlach throws her hands in the air. "I had to play along until I could leave! I didn't have a choice! And I've killed a lot of demons, fine, but that's it!"

"You're one of Zariel's favourite soldiers," says Wyll.

"I know. I hated it. Can't you look inside my brain?" Karlach points at her temple. "Talk to me, worm to worm, I'll show you!"

Wyll's face contorts with anger. For a moment, he simply points his rapier, fuming.

Is he looking inside her mind? You aren't sure. Whenever *you* do it, you stumble on your feet and forget where you are. Wyll simply looks like he's thinking, his eye flitting sideways and back again, his rapier wavering very slightly as he inhales and exhales.

Then he drops his blade into the dirt.

"Shit." he says simply.

"*Thank* you," breathes Karlach, "I—"

Wyll isn't paying attention. He kicks the sword away from him. "Shit. Shit!"

"Wyll?" you say.

He turns his back, kicks the ground, and gives a wordless growl of frustration. He runs his hands over his face. Karlach is watching him with her head tilted, expression guarded.

Wyll can't bring himself to turn back around for a few moments.

"I was tricked," Wyll says, at last. Despite his furious body language, his voice is low and hollow. "I was tricked into thinking you were a devil. You're innocent. She wants me to kill an innocent person."

"I'm sorry someone tricked you, soldier. But no harm done!" says Karlach, waving her hands for emphasis. "I can help you make back the money, if you're being paid, or..."

Wyll licks his lips. You realise that, hidden somewhere in the show of rage, Wyll isn't angry at all but *frightened*; the look in his eyes is one of helpless terror.

Karlach's voice takes on a pleading tone. "Or – what if we have a fight? You take a pop, I'll take a pop, we'll both get nice and bloody and you can tell whoever that you did your best but..."

"No," says Wyll. "I... I was supposed to kill you. That was the mission."

"Look, mate," says Karlach, "I don't want to die. I'll kill you if I have to, but I *really* don't want to."

"I'm not helping either of you," announces Shadowheart. She's been pulling on her stockings and shoes back on, all the better to run off if they start fighting in the middle of camp.

"I believe as part of our agreement to work together that I agreed not to kill any innocents," says Lae'zel. She's smirking.

Wyll looks at you.

"Well, what will happen to you if you let her live?" you ask. "Will your patron kill you?"

Not the response Wyll was hoping for. He winces.

"Probably not," he says.

"You—" Karlach, for the first time, looks a little threatened. "You working for a devil? For *her*?"

"Not Zariel," says Wyll.

He walks over to his sword and picks it up. Karlach takes two steps back. All he does, though, is put it back in its scabbard.

"A different devil, though," he says grimly. "I need to talk to her. She's not going to be happy about me letting you live."

Karlach says, "You're not...?"

"I'm not going to take the life of a devil's innocent victim." Wyll's voice is dull and uninspired. He clears his throat, and repeats it again, this time with feeling: "I'm not going to kill you. I'm the Blade of Frontiers. Join us here, on our search for a cure."

Karlach blinks. "Wh— really? I mean— I know I said — *shit*! You're putting your neck on the line with a devil for me!"

He gives her a hard, bitter smile. "I'm the fool who entered into a pact with one," he says. "I had a choice. You didn't."

"I..." She swallows. "Thank you. Gods, thank you so much. Look, this devil — if she comes for you, she'll have to go through me first, alright? You catch a whiff of sulphur and I'll be there. I've killed a *lot* of monsters."

He shakes his head. "It's fine," he says. "She'll wait for me to contact her after dark, probably. It might be fine. She won't kill me, she *needs* me. And my powers still work. The pact still stands."

Karlach says, "Wyll—"

"Is the dispute between you over?" Lae'zel's voice cuts across Karlach's with military precision.

"Er," says Wyll, "Yes."

"Good. Enough chatter," she says, "We have far more important matters to discuss. We have finished scouting along the road."

Still sitting in the grass, Shadowheart gives a snort.

"What?" snaps Lae'zel.

"Oh, nothing. It's just amusing how oblivious you are," says Shadowheart, "Obviously Wyll and Karlach don't want to talk about this. Look at them!"

"Hi, I'm Karlach," says Karlach, "We've met."

"I am indifferent to what you *want!*" Lae'zel snaps. "I concern myself with what we *need*. We found a patrol out there, as suspected. The *kith'rak* of the patrol gave me the task I must complete, and with its completion, we will be permitted to enter Rosymorn Creche to the west, and use its *zaith'isk*."

"Yes, captain Voss," remarks Wyll, "Nice man. Only threatened to kill me once."

"Errr," says Karlach, "You're going to have to translate a few words for there, sister, the tadpole's only done so much to catch me up."

Lae'zel gives an impatient sigh. "A *cure*," she says, laying on the emphasis. "Just a few days from here is a githyanki settlement, and there we will be cured of our parasites."

"They'll cure *us*, you see, because we're Lae'zel's servants," says Shadowheart, "Isn't that right, Lae'zel?"

Lae'zel growls. "With my blessing, you may be selected for purification rather than termination. It is my people's duty to remove the scourge of the mind flayers in all its forms. If it were not, *elf*, then I would be content to leave you to your fate."

"Half-elf, actually," Shadowheart shoots back, "I suppose you wouldn't know the difference."

"Lae'zel," you press, "You said your superior...Voss..."

"Kith'yak Voss."

"Kith'yak Voss. What did he ask you to do?"

"A matter of simplicity." She gives a dignified, confident nod. "I have been tasked with the recovery of a relic that belongs to our people. I am informed it resembles a small, metallic shape with many sides."

Shadowheart, once again proving herself not to be especially shadowy, makes eye contact with you.

"Did he tell you where to look?" you ask.

"It is thought that it fell from the ship with us," she answers. "No other details are known. It could be anywhere."

"What is it?"

"I was not informed. It would be irrelevant to my mission."

"Hey," says Karlach, "Didn't those two cultists we met earlier saying something about that?"

"You're right," you say. "There was a dead man with a mind flayer tadpole. Apparently he was looking for something that fell from a ship."

"*Kaincha!* Thieves, seeking our magicks. Kith'rak Voss ought to be informed. But no matter," says Lae'zel, "We will simply locate it first."

Well, *that's* certainly true. "What else did you find?" you ask. "Were there gnolls?"

Wyll slinks away from the group as you ask this. you see Karlach glance between the conversation and him before sloping after him, pointed tail hung low and shy.

"Many. Many are now dead," Lae'zel gestures to the myriad bloodstains that cover her armour, "But still, hordes." She gives that little exclamation, the *ch'k!* which presumably translates to something analogous to *hmph, whatever*.

You say, "I talked to a girl yesterday whose teacher was killed by gnolls. It sounds like they've halted travel through the area."

"To that, I concede," she says, surprising you. "There were far too many for Wyll and I to fight through alone. Wyll insisted we intervene for a helpless man while we were travelling," she smirks. "A caravan of armed men attempted to reach Baldur's Gate, and only two were left surviving, an officer and a youth. They are in our debt now. They belong to a trade organisation called the Zhentarim."

"Lae'zel, the Zhentarim aren't traders," you say, "They're criminals."

She shrugs. "I'm sure their trade is forbidden by some of this world's lawmakers. Most things are. But nonetheless, they are traders, and they are in our debt. That is a boon."

You can't argue with that, really. "We learned Halsin's being held in a goblin encampment, in an abandoned temple," you tell her. "Your mission gives us a second reason to go there."

"I fail to see how."

"Goblins," you say, "They're scavengers. Specifically, they've been looting every traveller and refugee in the area, as well as searching its buildings for supplies. If anyone found the relic, one way or another, it'll be there."

Lae'zel thinks about that for a moment. "...A possibility. I have read about these goblinoids. I know of their innate criminal tendencies."

That's a couple of interesting pieces of information. First, yesterday might have been the first time Lae'zel saw goblins; second, Lae'zel has books where she comes from, and third, those books – even though they're in space – still have racial stereotypes in them. "Some goblins aren't criminals," you say, "But these ones definitely are."

"A good next step," Lae'zel declares. "We will raid this goblin encampment and recover the relic from within, and in so doing, liberate the denizens of the Grove."

She smiles a sharp-toothed grin.

"The work of a *she'lak* is less demanding than I thought. Perhaps there are advantages to charity."

"Yes," you tell her, "As I tell the children, it's nice to be nice."

She nods sagely. To her, you suppose, this is exotic philosophy. Shadowheart gives another snort.

"Well, that settles that," Shadowheart says, "We'll have to tell Astarion and Gale, when they get back."

All in all, the mood around your little mercenary camp is pretty upbeat, all things considered. You don't know what Wyll and Karlach spoke about when they slipped away, but next time you see them, Wyll is building Karlach a tent, just like he did for you. Evidently, the tension between them has eased a little. Shadowheart hides herself away, artefact safely hidden. Hopefully, she's going to be a little more careful about showing it off now that there are *two* different groups looking for it.

Would Lae'zel's people really cure you in exchange for the artefact?

...The thing about that is that you're not sure. One of the visiting scholars at the academy, a gith-rebel named V'ziir-Ag, once explained to you in some detail that the githyanki are encouraged to follow rules and never question superiors, no matter what, and they're kept on a diet of lies about the gith god-queen Vlaakith. Vlaakith, he explained, is evil and merciless, but also manipulative and cunning. Her ardent followers are brainwashed into obedience, or have the same deceptive nature she does.

Then again: nobody at the academy would talk to V'ziir-Ag, and all seemed extremely intimidated by him. Maybe *he* was being fed lies about Vlaakith by the githzerai. The truth, as Da would say, is rarely obvious.

That's what's on your mind when Astarion shows back up, at least. As usual, he simply appears in the camp with nobody having seen him arrive.

"Astarion!" you say, when you notice him, and he gives you a tiny bow. "Did you find anything in the swamp?"

"Nothing useful, I'm afraid. Some frogs, some twig blights, a mad old woman living alone, and a lot of completely empty, uninhabited swampland." He looks over at Karlach. "Although I see *you've* been busy. I'm glad we're keeping her. She looks like she could snap a bear in half."

Karlach notices you looking and comes over, Wyll in tow. Lae'zel and Shadowheart make their appearances, too curious to see what Astarion has to report.

"So where's Gale?" you ask.

"Sorry?"

"Gale," you say, "Where is he? Was he not with you?"

Astarion's eyebrows crease. The lines in his face deepen a little as he frowns, glances around, and doesn't see what he's looking for from anyone's faces. His mild puzzlement becomes more severe as you all wait for him to respond, crystallising into a look of absolute, genuine bafflement.

"Who's Gale?" he says, and the sensation that you might actually be making progress winks away in an instant.

Chapter 8

"Ow!" Astarion swats Shadowheart's hand out of his face. "Gods, woman, are you doing magic or just trying to blind me? Get your fingers out of my eyeballs, you're far too close to me already!"

"I wouldn't be touching you at *all* if you just held still for a minute!" Shadowheart snaps. "This is the *opposite* process of what I'm used to. I need to concentrate!"

It has taken Shadowheart less than a day to inform almost everyone that she worships Shar. It was pretty much the only way to convince Astarion she could get rid of the memory-altering enchantment at all. Her bedside manner is awful.

Whoever wiped Astarion's memory was a little too heavy-handed. Astarion remembers distinctly that yesterday he tricked nobody into turning his back and then threatened that nobody with a dagger on the ground, a fact he agrees is strange. Convincing him something had been done to him was easy, but unlocking the missing Gale-shaped piece of his mind again is apparently another matter.

"Look me in the eyes," Shadowheart instructs him, holding one hand over each of his cheeks. "Into my pupils. ...Like that. Now, say something true. Anything."

Astarion, with Shadowheart's gaze boring into him, looks incredibly uncomfortable. "My name's Astarion," he says.

"And now something false. Don't look away."

"...The sky is green."

"Good," murmurs Shadowheart. "That's enough to begin. Let's start with when you arrived here..."

Wyll paces up and down beside Shadowheart's makeshift amnesia clinic. You suspect worrying about Gale is easier for Wyll than worrying about his own predicament, because he hasn't spoken a peep about his patron since he and Karlach spoke. He has instead dedicated his efforts solely to being angry with himself over nothing.

"We shouldn't have split up," he mutters. "Knowing this area is dangerous, knowing there are nefarious plots afoot and not knowing why. Gods *damn* it! I hope he's all right."

Lae'zel shrugs and offers, in condolence, "It shouldn't cause much of a delay to our mission if Gale is dead."

"I hope he's not dead," says Karlach. "I like Gale."

"You've never met Gale," you tell her.

"Yeah, but I watched him on the tadpole." She taps her temple. "Loads of things you can pick up."

Wyll, unamused by your bantering, continues to pace.

"It could be that skeleton you and Shadowheart met," he says. "Skeletons don't talk, and wizards don't vanish into thin air. Is that a coincidence? It could be, but it might not..."

"Could you stop talking, please?" says an irritable Shadowheart.

You tail Wyll as he stalks towards a quieter part of the campsite. He lapses into silence for the walk, but it's clear from his expression that the stream of questions is continuing with just as much focus and dedication inside his head.

"One strange thing after another," Wyll mutters. "My powers are too weak. They have been since the Nautiloid – have you noticed? The tadpoles did something to us. Made us weaker."

"I wasn't using any powers before the Nautiloid," you say. "But it doesn't really matter. We still seem to be holding up fine."

"*We're* holding up fine," says Wyll. "Gale is somewhere out there, having been scrubbed from Astarion's mind like a stain! Who would do that? *What* would do that?"

"Someone who felt the need to cover their tracks," you tell him, "Which means they're afraid of being caught."

"And if Shadowheart can't make her magic work on Astarion, they'll have succeeded," says Wyll, "Because we'll have no leads at all on what happened to Gale. Gods *damn* it!"

Not to mention the Bhaalspawn File that's burning a hole in your lute-case, or Withers' odd declaration that your survival specifically was a mistake. Perhaps Wyll's life is better left uncomplicated by these things.

You say, "Calm down a moment—"

"I am calm."

"—and work through what you know, rather than fixating on what you don't."

Wyll runs his hands down his face.

"According to the gnome you met, the cult of the Absolute was active in Baldur's Gate *and* here," he says carefully. "They've gotten the goblins *and* some of the locals under their sway, they've kidnapped one of the Grand Dukes, and two of their worshippers we've found have had mind flayer tadpoles, altered ones, like ours."

"Halsin goes to an old Selûnite temple and finds it overrun with goblins," you say. "Those goblins start launching attacks on this druid grove. They've all been sent to look for an artefact that apparently fell with the ship..."

"...And Gale has vanished so forcefully, Astarion can't remember who he is." Wyll sighs. "If there's some sense to be found in all this, I haven't a clue where."

"Easy," you say. "Where is everyone in the cult of the Absolute going?"

"Moonrise," murmurs Wyll. "Wherever *that* might be."

"And so?"

"Whoever's behind the goblins will know more, including the location of Moonrise. The answer lies somewhere in the goblin camp."

"All the answers have so far," you say. "It can't be a coincidence."

You'd hoped to bring Wyll some peace with this line of questioning. It winds up not mattering, in the end, because Shadowheart's memory trick *does* work on Astarion. She draws her hands away from him and he stumbles like the motion just pulled off a dust-sheet from his brain.

"It was a hag!" Astarion exclaims. "That rancid *bitch* tricked me!"

You remember this being one of Zevlor's miscellaneous fears and sigh to yourself.

"What you mean," says Shadowheart archly, "Is that you fell for a trick by a *hag*?"

"I – she had information! About the tadpole! She said she could cure it!" Astarion puts on a show of being flustered, you notice, but there's so colour in his cheeks at all. His face is as pale as ever.

"*Did* she get rid of it?" asks Shadowheart.

Astarion snarls. "Of course she didn't! She made a show of trying, then told me it had been altered by Netherese magic. The amount of magical force required to destroy it is... astronomical. The kind of feat one might expect from a *demigod*. Apparently."

"Of course she told you that!" snaps Shadowheart. "She'd already gotten her hands on Gale by that point, hadn't she?"

"Wait," you say, "She must have offered you a deal. What was the offer?"

Astarion grimaces. "A promise to remove the tadpole without harming me, in exchange for something of mine. She said it was something I had with me when I entered, that she'd already taken it, and all I had to do was let her keep it. So... I checked my pockets."

"Oh, good *grief*," says Shadowheart.

"She'd taken the book on Silvanite rituals. The one I stole from Kagha. I thought that was... *all* she'd taken." Astarion has the grace to sound, at least, slightly embarrassed. "By that point I had already forgotten that Gale existed."

Your palms are sweaty. You wrack your brains for your mother's lessons on hags. Gods, your mother knew a lot about hags. Too much.

There are only three good ways out of a hag's deal, whispers Sunrise Tavernsong, Find someone else to take the fall when the deal closes, kill the hag before the deal closes, or never close the deal at all.

A hag's deal. You always get what you asked for. But it's never worth it. Which means...

"She was telling the truth," you say. Heads whip round to look at you. "She tried to remove the tadpole and it really was touched by Netherese magic. There's no way she'd have been powerful enough to take Gale from you if she told a direct lie."

"Lying would make her weaker?" says Wyll. "How?"

"It's how they work," you say. "A hag's magic can do almost anything, in exchange for any price offered – as long as a mortal soul agrees to the terms, and the hag follows."

"So... we need a loophole." Wyll frowns. "...Like in a contract with a devil."

"Astarion, what was the hag's offer *exactly*?" you ask. "The precise words."

Astarion frowns. He flexes his wrist, as though about to speak, several times before he finally thinks of what to say. "She said that, to the best of her ability, she'd remove the tadpole and tell me everything she could deduce about it, and that she guaranteed I wouldn't be harmed unless I purposefully tried to harm her first."

"That seems fairly airtight," murmurs Wyll.

"I *was* a magistrate," Astarion huffs, "I didn't just accept the first bargain she offered me without negotiating the terms."

"And in return?" you say.

"I'd allow her to keep something she'd already taken from me when I entered, something she assured me I wouldn't miss."

"And she tricked you into thinking that was *just* a book," says Shadowheart. "Not a book and an entire wizard."

"That's exactly what she said?" you press Astarion.

"Yes."

"Something taken from you, that you wouldn't miss?"

"The deal doesn't hold water," says Wyll, "Astarion *does* miss Gale."

"Well, I wouldn't put it *that* strongly," mutters Astarion.

"The terms were true when the deal was made. That won't work," you say. "But there could be another loophole."

By now, Karlach and Lae'zel have joined you. Karlach seems as sunny as ever – dealing with a creature like this is probably standard fare for her. Lae'zel's expression is as stern and militant as ever, too.

"And what," Lae'zel interjects, "Is preventing us from simply slaying the hag?"

"Well, nothing," you say, "But—"

"We are six capable and experienced killers. What good is dallying around, looking for loopholes? Hags are creatures of blight." Lae'zel tosses her head proudly. "So we burn her. It seems simple."

"You said it, soldier," says Karlach. "Fuck these monsters and their games. Hags feel pain the same way we do."

Wyll looks at you, and you realise he has appointed you as the official Expert in Hags.

"It could be a safer option than renegotiating," you say, "As long as the hag didn't overpower us."

"I'd like to see her try," snorts Karlach. "Hags are tricksters. They're not fighters."

Astarion shuffles uncomfortably. "Look," he says, "Gale seemed like a perfectly nice, if not occasionally very annoying, person. But are we really going to put our necks on the line with a *hag* for him?"

"He has a point. Better one of us killed than seven," says Shadowheart.

You expect Wyll to argue this point, or Karlach. To your surprise, it's Lae'zel who speaks up.

"Better to die united than be picked apart as scraps," she declares. "If we fail to strike at our enemies as one, then we are weakened, not strengthened, by working together. An insult to one is an insult to all. We *will* kill the hag!"

"Lae'zel is right!" says Wyll. "We're no cowards. Gale is our friend, and we're not leaving him behind."

"Gods," Astarion mutters quietly, "They've spent one day together and he's already got the gith doing it as well."

Shadowheart snorts.

"There's a practical element to rescuing Gale as well," you say.

Astarion scowls. "What's that?"

"The hag took him," you say, "And not you. Why not the other way around? Probably because she needed him for something – that means Gale is leverage."

"Gale is not *leverage*," says Wyll, "He's a person!"

"Well. Yes," you say, "A person whose bargaining chip was valuable to a hag. That means something."

Shadowheart chews that over, then shrugs her agreement. Astarion looks around, sees his case is lost, and falls quiet.

"All right, Lae'zel," says Wyll. "How are we going to do this?"

Lae'zel looks up at the dimming sky, then at you, her ragtag warriors. "Swift and lethal. Let us strike while the iron is hot!"

"Hear, hear," says Karlach. "Let's grind that hag to dust!"

You look at Astarion. "You'll have to show us the way," you tell him.

"Yes," says Astarion unhappily. "I suppose I'd better. It would be *such* a shame if we were to get lost, never see the hag again, and live long, happy lives."

The wetlands near the enclave are surprisingly beautiful. Flowers grow among the bog-grass, the smell of saltwater fresh and tangy. Someone is grazing sheep here, and they stare at you, moving skittishly as grazing sheep often do. It's almost soothing.

Not quite soothing, though. There's something in the air that makes you uneasy.

Lae'zel charges down the path like she's afraid of nothing. She claims that Crèche K'liir had "extensive reading" on the subject of hags, and that she was as dedicated to her studies as to honing her skills with the blade. You told her that at the Open Scroll the kids' curriculum was about 15% blades at most. She told you this explained the "sheer stupidity of some *istik*, especially the children". Lae'zel is certain she knows what to expect.

"Hags are slightly larger than githyanki and resemble humanoid women in build and physiology," she rattles off diligently. "They possess moderate magical abilities of enchantment, illusion, and necromancy, but are physically unremarkable with no innate healing abilities."

"Not everything can be written down and neatly categorised in a book," says Wyll. "We should be as cautious as possible. You never know what to expect with a hag."

"What was her name?" you ask Astarion.

"Ethel," he says, and grimaces, as though the word has a bad taste. "Auntie Ethel."

"Hags often take familial titles," you say, because you can see Lae'zel is about to ask whether or not there's any relation. "Auntie Ethel. Nana Pickbone. Granny Juju."

"You know a lot about hags," remarks Wyll.

"My mother dealt with a lot of hags." You shrug. "Enough to ban me from ever joining her."

"You know, given the sorts of things your mother seems to have let you join her for," says Wyll, "That's not at all encouraging."

"A hag with access to a child is very dangerous. Especially girls," you say, "And especially girls with an active reproductive cycle."

Lae'zel begins, "What—"

"Nope," cuts in Shadowheart, "Absolutely not. Let's not talk about this. Being here is hellish enough as it is."

Sheep bleat at you as you pass. Astarion, uncharacteristically, shudders.

Your boots sink into the mire of the sunlit wetlands. An uneasy silence settles, pierced only by the squelching mud and bleating of sheep.

"Group around me," Shadowheart orders, and when you all obey, she bows her head and says, "With the blessing of Shar..."

Nothing feels different when you start moving again, but when you glance back, you see that your footprints are vanishing as you walk away, leaving no trace of your passage. The sound of footfalls is gone now.

Another sheep bleats, and Astarion mutters, "Horrid little beasts." An odd anti-sheep prejudice.

The ocean laps in the distance, and the marshland bubbles and murmurs, creating a constant soothing lullaby of sound. Speaking above a whisper feels wrong, with Shar's blessing over you, so you creep on in silence. The sun is warm on your skin.

Astarion leads you towards a cottage, which is so overgrown with ivy and houseplants it barely stands out. There's a well at the garden entrance, and Wyll drifts over to it, placing a hand on its lip. He gazes into the water below, frowning.

You get the urge to hum a song. What's the harm in that, now?

Wyll reaches over to touch the well's rope and Astarion appears out of nowhere and slaps Wyll's wrist with so much force the sound breaks through Shar's veil of silence. Wyll yelps in surprise.

"Hands off! This whole place is covered in illusions." Astarion snaps, though he seems more jumpy than genuinely annoyed. "Don't touch anything."

You peek into the well. The water is dark, and sweet-smelling. moss grows between the worn grey bricks. At the bottom is just a glimmer of liquid...

...are those *bones*?

The illusion doesn't quite *fade* as much as it cracks along its surface. The air *is* warm – fetid and cloying and so warm you're drenched in sweat. The smell *is* sweet – it's rotten, and overpowering. The grass is yellow, the apples are tinged with mould. The apple trees have thorns and hand-shapes branches. And at the bottom of the well is a rotting, stinking carcass, the water stained with rot.

You move along before Astarion can swat you.

The gnarled cottage hunches over the garden like a squatting toad. Only on the second glance do you see that the plants are rotting and stinking. In the corner of your eyes, there's mould and mushrooms, but when you look at the windowsills they're laden with jars and baskets of food, seemingly pristine.

You feel like a child in a fairy-tale. Of course, the moral of any good fairy-tale is that you shouldn't trust the fairies. Even the benevolent ones revel in trickery.

"Shall we?" you whisper.

Astarion makes a good show of confidence. He creeps up to the cottage's door with professional softness in his steps and movements. But when he stops at the door, hand hovering over the latch, you see terror twitching in the ends of his fingers and in the flit of his eyes.

Just for a moment. Then he quietly unlatches the door and lets it swing open with a slow creak, revealing the hag inside.

She stands next to the fireplace of her overgrown cottage, where a low wooden table has been laid with a foul mockery of an afternoon tea. The form she takes is of an old human woman. Sitting at her table, with haunted eyes and a strained grimace, is a young woman in a green dress and running mascara. By the curve of her stomach, she looks to be in the middle stages of pregnancy.

Auntie Ethel squats over – no, she must simply be *standing* over the young woman. They both look human. Don't they? You can feel illusion and enchantment tugging on the corners of your mind, making connections and recognising things that aren't there. Something niggles in your ear, a thin, wheedling melody of a magic you can't recognise, only that it makes it difficult to concentrate.

"Come on, Mayrina," purrs the old woman, "You're eating for two now. You'll have another slice of tart, won't you?"

Mayrina's face is obviously full of fear. The makeup running down her face gives her the effect of looking like she's been crying for hours. Her voice, though, is stilted and polite: "Auntie, I'm stuffed."

"Ah now, girl, you ought to get some food in you. You're very slight. You want your strength for the birth, don't you?"

The old woman glances up, sees you, and breaks into a smile.

"Visitors!" she exclaims. "So many in one day. And is that my friend Astarion?"

"Hag," mutters Astarion, presumably by way of greeting.

"Sit down there with me and we'll have a chat," says Auntie Ethel. "You can tell me all your woes. Did Astarion recommend me? I don't usually do mates' rates, but I'd be happy to make an exception for you, my special, tadpoled friends."

"Leave," the young woman urges you, "Get out of here. Run!"

The hag ignores her. "You'll have tea, won't you?" says Auntie Ethel, her old human face crinkling into a grandmotherly smile. She gestures to her table of rotting food. "I'll just put the kettle on—"

Even though she's wearing armour, Lae'zel can move alarmingly fast. She crouches, runs, and before anyone can stop her *leaps* a supernatural distance into the air. Lae'zel comes crashing down onto the table like a giant hailstone and brings her greatsword down as she does, cleaving a bloody slice right through the old woman's skull.

Lae'zel slashes again as she brings her greatsword back up, then cracks the old woman's skull off the table like an egg for good measure.

Mayrina scrambles out of her chair and away from the attacking gith. Wyll and Karlach, who apparently weren't warned that Lae'zel was going to attack quite so suddenly, are just about reaching the gory scene of the crime, weapons drawn and faces baffled.

"It's dead," says Lae'zel.

"Or at least it looks that way," cautions Wyll. "Miss? Are you alright?"

The young woman stares down at the blood pooling on the wooden floorboards. "What have you done?" she cries.

Lae'zel frowns. "This was a hag. It was keeping you captive."

"Captive?!" A look of fury flashes across her face. "I wanted to be here!"

"If you made a deal with this hag—" Wyll begins.

"That's none of your bloody business!" snaps Mayrina.

The urge to hum is extremely strong. The old woman's mutilated body is still. *Too* still; a dying body groans and twitches, fights on its way out. There's no way she's dead. That's just what the hag wants you to think.

Mayrina shouts, "I had it under control! I tried to warn you! Now she's going to *kill you!*"

Enough of this nonsense. "She can speak for herself," you say. "We know she's listening."

The hag's neck snaps back into place with a sickening crack.

She lifts a hand to the gash in her skull and tuts. She brushes the wounds with her hands, and they fall off her head and onto the table as little red beetles. The insects scurry for darkness, and you fight the urge to flinch.

"Evening Tavernsong, daughter of Sunrise Tavernsong," says the hag. "Eve, the daughter of my dear friend Sunny. I should have known I wouldn't get one past you, pet."

She snaps her bloodied finger and the illusion over the entire swamp vanishes.

It's like the lid being removed from a compost bin. Suddenly the gnarled, rotting cottage is free of any impression of homeliness. The swamp outside is foul, stinking, and decaying, the heat and stench suddenly without distraction.

Something screams outside, and it's definitely not a sheep.

"Gods alive," you hear Karlach stage-whisper.

The hag herself is still changing. She peels off her bloodied human skin like an unwanted bit of laundry, and folds herself out of it, impossibly large. She's about seven or eight feet tall, and her green, warty skin hangs loosely from her frame, growing mushrooms and moss at her shoulders like a filthy capelet. She grins, her teeth rotten but very long and sharp.

The smell is indescribable.

"Much better," says Auntie Ethel.

"There's a passageway!" shouts Mayrina. "It's behind—"

"*Whist*, Mayrina," snaps Auntie Ethel. She snaps her long, bony fingers, and Mayrina vanishes in a gust of stale air.

Lae'zel, predictably, comes at the hag with her sword. She feints another overhead swing, then brings it into a jab with the butt of her sword. She flies towards Auntie Ethel like a dart and the hag gestures carelessly. Lae'zel freezes mid-motion, like an artist's sketch. Only her eyes remain mobile, and they dart around in mute fury.

"Now, my sweet," she says, addressing you directly, "Shall we chat?"

Manners have power; it's her house. You sit at the table. Wyll follows your lead. Karlach stares at the frozen Lae'zel, twitching, but eventually does the same. Shadowheart peeks out from behind a bookshelf, mace in hand, and sits too. Astarion is nowhere to be seen.

"Astarion," you say. A moment's silence, then suddenly he's there, pulling up a chair and shooting you an angry glare. Auntie Ethel nods her appreciation.

The table is a tallfolk one, and you're far too small for it. It makes you feel like a little girl, playing tea parties. With the illusion gone, the food on it is revealed to be a mixture of real and rancid. A treacle tart sits next to a raw pig's stomach. In front of Astarion is a plate of dead rats.

The hag looks up at Lae'zel, her sword still mid-motion, her hair frozen in the air.

"Are you done being bold?" Auntie Ethel says. "Come down and play nice, like a good girl."

Lae'zel drops and her legs immediately give way underneath her. She hits the ground with a clatter; she gives a wordless gasp of pain, crawls to her feet, and stumbles towards one of the table's empty chairs. Only one left, now.

"Gale," you say, and Auntie Ethel snaps her fingers. Gale – gagged, bound, and far more bruised and beaten than Mayrina was – appears in the final seat, slumping immediately out of place, because his hands appear to be fully tied behind his back. He makes a single, pained sound of alarm when he appears – *aaagghhh?! –* sees where he is and what's happening, and falls immediately silent.

You sit around the hag's awful table like you're attending the worst tea party in the world. Auntie Ethel picks up a frog-shaped teapot (which, based on its expression, was not always a teapot) and pours herself a cup of stinking brown liquid.

"A sup?" she says, offering you the teapot, and you shake your head. The warts on her face rearrange themselves as she smiles sweetly.

She's waiting for you to speak. Why? What is she expecting? How can you *subvert* it? Knowing hags, knowing your mother, you're almost too overwhelmed to speak.

But speak you do. "We're here to discuss a previous transaction," you say.

Astarion is hiding his dagger under the table. He's glaring at you with fearful eyes. The hag terrifies him, rightfully. But you don't doubt his deal with the hag involved some private details he didn't share, too.

"Are you, now?" says Auntie Ethel. "What seems to be the matter?"

"We're missing a wizard," you say. "You didn't have permission to take him."

"Didn't I?"

"You said you would remove the tadpole in exchange for what was given," you say, "You didn't."

She shakes her head. A beetle crawls down one of the twig-tangled, mould-coated filaments that pass for her hair.

"I said I would do my best without killing Astarion, my love," she says, "That little parasite of yours can't be removed without melting your brain for good. It's the same for all of you. I'll tell you that little one for free, lovelies."

Lae'zel forces, through gritted teeth, the word, "*Liar!*"

"I'd never tell you a lie, petal," says Auntie Ethel. "Ask your friend here. I'm telling the truth – aren't I, Evie?"

The nickname sends a wave of revulsion through you. you fight to keep it down. You're pretty sure she *is* telling the truth, though you shrug and say, "Who can say?", just to unsettle her.

Auntie Ethel frowns. "Either way, I'm afraid my services aren't cheap," she says. "I have a saying: if you're good at something, never do it for free."

"Is removing mind flayer tadpoles something you're good at?" you ask. "The evidence has been inconclusive so far."

She glowers at you. "If it was an ordinary tadpole, not a bother at all," she says, "But like I told your friend, something's been done to it. Netherese magic. Tainted, twisted stuff. Oh, if you only knew..."

She cackles. You look at Gale, and see his eyes boring into yours. it's impossible to tell what he's trying to convey, in his current state.

"Never you mind," says Auntie Ethel. "Either way, the deal still holds, so the wizard is mine. Tough!"

"The pregnant woman," says Wyll. "Mayrina. What about her?"

The hag shrugs. "She doesn't want rescuing," she says. "You heard it yourself."

Through his gag, Gale gives a cautionary *hmmmphhh!!*, with which Wyll apparently agrees. "Let her go as well," says Wyll. "And we're even."

"I'm afraid Mayrina and I have ongoing business," says Ethel. "She won't be wanting to join you. Awfully sorry!"

"We won't be needing her permission," says Wyll.

The hag cackles. "Has no-one ever told you about the importance of consent?"

You rub your hands on your lap. You're certain you're missing something. Why does Auntie Ethel have you here, like this? She wants something from you. What is it?

"Let me be direct," says Wyll. His voice is level, brave. "Give us back Gale and Mayrina and we'll walk away peacefully."

"That sounds to me like a *deal*," grins the hag. "Are you sure you're up for negotiating a bargain like that, *pup*? After all, it didn't work out so well for you last time."

Ashen fury fills Wyll's eyes. "That's enough," you say.

"Yes, Wyll, let your friend here do the talking. She's a lot better at thinking before she talks than you are. You don't want to agree to something you'll regret, do you, little cú? Or is the Blade of Frontiers too self-deluded for regrets?"

"No deals," says Wyll firmly. "A promise. Let them go and you'll live."

The hag smiles widely. Her teeth are large and peg-like, stained and rotting.

"There's another option I enjoy more," says Auntie Ethel, "I keep them, I get to live, *and* I tie you up and boil you alive till the skin flays off your flesh, then peel the strips off you and eat them while you die screaming. How's that?"

"It lacks appeal," you say, before Wyll says something too definite in response. "I think we're done talking."

Auntie Ethel sighs. "I suppose we are," she says. "Such a shame. And I had so many interesting things to tell you... like about what Kagha's up to, for example. Or Viconia DeVir, or Cazador Szarr... I could even tell you a thing or two about poor little Imoen."

You force yourself not to hesitate. "Not interested."

Auntie Ethel gives you a wide, twisted smile.

"Whatever you like, my sweet," she says. "Now, if you know what's good for you, you'll pack up and go home, tadpoles snug in your heads. I might not be so generous next time I see your ugly little faces poking around here."

You repeat, "I think we're done talking now, Ethel."

She clicks her fingers one last time. Both she and Gale vanish into scraps of air and ash, leaving you alone at the tea table.

Wyll immediately throws himself out of his chair, as does Lae'zel.

"*Shit!*" *Wyll* gasps. It seems more out of shock and disgust than anything else.

Lae'zel, for her part, simply starts smashing up the hag's furniture without comment.

Astarion furiously rounds in on Wyll.

"What the hells did you go and do that for?! Gale was right *there*! We could have had him back in our grasp if you hadn't started firing off threats over a stranger!" Astarion snarls. "You heard the woman, she doesn't *want* to be rescued!"

"I don't care what she wants," Wyll mutters. "She's pregnant."

"You idiotic bleeding heart, what does *that* have to do with anything? You could very well have gotten Gale killed for good! Not to mention *us*!"

"Because that's how hags reproduce," you say. You stay sitting at the table. It seems like an easy way to prevent yourself from reacting in any unwelcome ways, if you make yourself stay sitting. "They eat newborns. Ethel is going to steal Mayrina's baby, eat it, give birth to a baby hag, and have Mayrina raise it."

"Oh, *boo hoo*, a bad mother experiences consequences for her actions! At least the damn thing won't have to experience the pain of being raised by a gullible simpleton!" Astarion has a way of looking especially vicious when his lips are pulled back in anger like this. There's something wolflike about his snarl. "Now what?! We blunder into the depths of a hag's lair, where she has *every* advantage, and hope she doesn't bloody trounce us effortlessly like she did *this* time?!"

"That's the plan, yes," says Wyll.

Astarion sweeps a load of crockery and rotten food off the table, where it crashes onto the floor. Lae'zel is smashing the frog teapots one by one. Apparently everyone is finding liberation in ruining Auntie Ethel's shitty furnishings.

Shadowheart says, quietly. "I'm in. She eats newborn babies, that's disgusting. I'll sleep better knowing she's dead."

Astarion throws his hands in the air. "Oh, it's *disgusting*? More disgusting than *death*, Shadowheart?!"

"Astarion, stop being a baby," Karlach orders. "I'm in too. Plan hasn't changed. We find the hag, we beat the hag."

Astarion is so aghast at being called this he doesn't even respond. Lae'zel tips over a bookshelf, dumps its contents on the floor, then hurls it at the fireplace. It vanishes right through the brick wall and lands with a clatter somewhere shortly behind.

"I have located the hidden passageway," Lae'zel states. "Hags hide their lairs behind simple illusions. She retreats because she is weak. Onward!"

You realise Lae'zel was actually being quite methodical in smashing the furniture. If being frozen by the hag unnerved her, she's choosing to hide it behind a veneer of stern military confidence. And it works. She walks right through the fireplace and vanishes through the wall with so much confidence that Wyll and Karlach follow her.

Shadowheart looks at you and Astarion.

"Something was going on with that hag," you say, "But I don't know what."

"That's vague," says Shadowheart. "But... I think I see what you mean, as well. Come on, then."

Behind the illusory door is a narrow stone passageway with a staircase leading down, with only darkness ahead. For the second time, you get the urge to take out Komira's locket only to remember it isn't there. Now doesn't seem like the time to bring it up, though. You half-expect Astarion not to follow at all, but when you glance back, he's reluctantly creeping behind you, scowling.

The path fades into darkness. You slow down a little; when Shadowheart notices you hesitating, she takes your arm – not your hand, but a shoulder grasp that's professional and firm – and guides you the rest of the way, where you can see a sickly green light shining at the bottom of the staircase.

The passageway opens into a cavern lit by glowing yellow-green underdark moss. The stone walls crackle with the luminescent magic of the deep, the smell of magic damp that always wafts from passages deep beneath the earth. Your eyes adjust slowly to the gloom. you're at the opening of a set of connected chambers, the rest of your erstwhile adventuring party slowly pressing forward.

"Any sign of the hag?" whispers Karlach, who is, evidently, not very good at whispering. The engine in her chest burns a soft candlelight orange in the darkness, so unlike the others, you can still clearly see Karlach's face.

"Not yet," answers Astarion, although you'd think their eyes would both be equally suited to the gloom. Elves and tieflings can both see in the dark, like cats. halflings, on the other hand, are blind in darkness. You didn't think humans could see in the dark either, but Wyll seems to be navigating it with perfect surety, so maybe they can.

You press on in silence. You pick out shapes in the cave as you pass. Rotting skeletons: no hag's lair would be complete without at least a few. A cauldron, lined at the bottom with small child-sized bones. A bright glowing mushroom grows from a divot in the cave ceiling at one point, creating a dim yellow spotlight; in the light is a rotting corpse, held together by taxidermy or magic or both, tethered by a chain to the wall. The man appears to have gouged his own eyes out shortly before dying. A plaque at the skeleton's feet reads: *My darling Edward. Asked never to see his family again.*

"Could be real, could be more trickery," murmurs Wyll, "Best not to pay it any mind."

He's got a point, but poor Edward leaves you feeling unsettled, nevertheless.

The next is a dead woman, mostly rotted away, with her dead hand fused to a silver mirror, which you decide it would be wiser not to look at. Shadowheart keeps a hand on you, leading you away from sudden drops and dips. There are several. The floor is seemingly designed to trip

you over, overgrown with tree roots and piles of dead leaves (paradoxically, considering you're underground, but it's a hag's aesthetic, after all).

"There's a plaque," murmurs Lae'zel.

"Ignore it," orders Wyll, "The less attention we pay these displays, the better."

The next spotlight hangs over a severed head on a pike. By the state of decay and the clotting blood, it's probably been there for weeks; nonetheless, its mouth bobs open and shut, its lips producing a dry, flapping wheeze as it struggles to produce words while most of its neck and throat are missing.

"Is she making us walk through her spooky gallery?" sneers Karlach. "Is this supposed to scare us?"

"I'm scared," you state.

"Well— yeah, me too," Karlach admits, "But an attitude sort of helps."

"Correct," says Lae'zel. "Let us insult the artworks. Baubles of the grotesque, meant to inspire cowardice in the weak. Are they meant to impress? Countless deaths more swift and painful have been caused by Crèche K'liir!"

There is a chorus of horrified yells as Lae'zel grabs the severed head and yanks it from the pike, leaving behind a crusty bloodstain. she chucks the head into the darkness, where you hear it land with a thump and a faint, gibbering moan.

"Shar guide me," mutters Shadowheart. "Grant me your blissful darkness. When we leave, let me forget ever seeing that."

Astarion gives a little delusional giggle.

A large wooden doorway, open, through which is a dirt tunnel. The large door, roughly wood-hewn, has a carved face that grimaces in agony. As you pass through, a soft, sad sigh escapes from the door's wooden lips. Lining the walls, staring at you as you pass, are wooden masks. five in total, although luckily, these ones make no sound.

The tunnel leads you further down. This area looks more like a building than a cave; the dirt walls are reinforced with rotting wooden beams, with plank walkways and crates among the mud.

How far underground are you, now? With no sign of sunlight, it's hard to know.

There are footsteps, murmurs; you glimpse people, dressed in ragged servants' outfits and, judging from the smell, living in their own filth, all with their faces covered by carved wooden

masks, like you saw earlier. They scurry around the hag's sprawling dungeon, sweeping and dusting despite the mud and filth, seemingly content to ignore you as you creep through.

One of them gets a little too close, stumbling towards you while muttering in slurred Sylvan, and Astarion shoves her hard enough to knock the mask right off her face.

The woman underneath coughs and gags, her skin wrinkling and her hair greying, and she drops dead before she can even say a word.

"Thralls to the hag," says Astarion, and grimaces. "They're better off dead."

You leave her body there, and the other thralls scurry around it, indifferent. They seem to be a variety of ages and races, although their shuffling movements and wooden masks are all perfectly identical. Their company is somehow much worse than the mutilated corpses were.

Dirt walls, wooden plankways. By the time you're descending into the belly of the hag's lair, you've taken several turns, gone up and down various passages, and looped back around seemingly at least once. It's impossible to know where you are, how far you've gone. You walk the labyrinth in uneasy silence, your footsteps still muffled by Shadowheart's blessing; there is only dripping, shuffling, the occasional murmur or moan.

The final chamber is a giant Underdark cavern. The stone floor is broken up into islands of safety in a great black yawning chasm, and Auntie Ethel stands waiting patiently in the centre, a haggard Gale standing next to her. Hanging over a precipice is a rusting cage attached to the ceiling by a flimsy-looking chain, and locked inside the cage, now also bound and gagged and staring at you with burning eyes, is Mayrina.

You and Shadowheart hang back at the entrance, where you can get a good look at the entire battlefield. Wyll, Karlach, and Lae'zel charge past you, closing the distance between the hag and their weapons.

The hag uses her finger and thumb to make a musket shape, the universal sign of 'I'm a spellcaster and you're about to regret fucking with me', and points it at the chain holding Mayrina aloft.

"That's enough," commands Auntie Ethel. "One more step and your pretty songbird here will be sleeping with the carrion crawlers!"

That's as much psychological warfare as it takes for Wyll and Karlach to freeze mid-charge, Lae'zel glaring at them before reluctantly stopping too.

Gale attempts to take the initiative and shove Auntie Ethel off the chasm. He might as well be shoving a brick wall. He bounces uselessly off of the hag.

"Don't be cheeky," says Auntie Ethel, sneering, and stops pointing at the chain so she can snatch him by the throat.

She picks him up by the neck, his legs dangling uselessly above the ground, and holds *him* over the precipice instead.

"One more chance to do this the easy way, my little loves," grins Auntie Ethel. "You can walk away, not a scratch on you – I'll take care of your friend, don't worry."

Wyll shakes his head. "We're doing this the good old-fashioned way," he declares, "Where the heroes slay the hag and rescue the maiden."

He draws his rapier with a clean metallic ring. Whether or not he's doing it on purpose, his methods – clear voice, showy pose, handsome face – send a ripple of doubt through the hag. *Nothing is more dangerous to a mind-reader, whispers your mother, than self-righteousness. So find a hero, Evie, and keep them close.*

Auntie Ethel sighs. She tosses Gale aside like a ragdoll, sending him crashing into the shadows near the cave wall.

"And we could have been such good friends," she says. "I suppose that'll need to wait until after I've added your screaming, tortured remains to my gallery upstairs. Are you excited? I suppose you're all good at being locked away and doing what you're told, in your own special ways."

She rears up to her full height. In her dilapidated cottage, her hunched form disguised the real size of her. Here, she stretches out her thin limbs and stands tall, her gnarled fingers clasped around a rotten, slug-infested wooden staff, and looms over her challengers like a stormfront.

Wyll tightens his grip on his rapier. He says, bold as anything, "Any last words?"

"Oh, petal," sneers Auntie Ethel, "I *always* get the last word."

She explodes into a swarm of flies. Clouds of them swarm Wyll, and he stumbles back, gagging, hidden in a flurry of tiny black shapes.

The figure of Auntie Ethel appears behind Karlach and Lae'zel, cackling, her hands spread as though offering them a hug.

A second Auntie Ethel appears in the shadows by Gale, a rusty knife clasped in her gnarled hands.

A third Auntie Ethel materialises back where the original one vanished, reaching towards Wyll, and you hear a high-pitched, witchlike peal of laughter from right behind you and Shadowheart

as the fourth materialises right in front of both of you, the stink of rot rolling off her as she leans towards you.

Four of them, and for all you know, the real one is invisible. Lihala is already in your hands, and you can already hear the battle-song before you even touch the strings. The music spills through your fingertips and across your tongue, and as it touches each of your companions you hear them echoed in the sound. the world slows down into beats and rests, into the familiar time-signatures of danger and magic. How many times have you danced this dance? So long ago, but so familiar, baked into you over a long, strange childhood. The hag, suddenly, is no longer frightening. Compared to your mother, she is nothing.

Your lips are already moving: *"Shadowheart! Tear her apart!"*

A waver of protective magic as Shadowheart swings her mace at Auntie Ethel... and it passes uselessly through nothing. There's a peal of horrible laughter as the illusion melts away. One down, three left.

Wyll, still trapped in the insect cloud, hunches over. He levitates, slowly, into the air, then throws out his arms and screams. Black, crackling energy explodes around him, forming dark lightning-bolt patterns as the flies drop dead in the air, and with them, the Auntie Ethel advancing on Wyll vanishes too. Two more Auntie Ethels.

The one by Gale snatches his wrist and hauls him into the air. The one by Karlach and Lae'zel has a hand on each of them, and they're both frozen, faces strained, under the effect of some magic that twangs with the sound of enchantment. Shadowheart murmurs something arcane, and places a hand on your shoulder. a wave of cold magic runs over you, something protective. "Go!" she says, pointing at Gale, and takes off running towards Karlach and Lae'zel. There's no sign of Astarion, even with your music feeling out for him around you. He's apparently good enough at hiding that you can't spot him even when you're like this.

You keep your eyes away from the perilous chasm. You walk, not trusting yourself to play and run at the same time without tripping. in the echoes you hear Karlach wrench free of Auntie Ethel's enchantment and place a sizzling hand on Lae'zel, snapping her free too, and they close in on the hag with their blades just as you get closer to Gale and the final Auntie Ethel. Here's hoping your one's fake, because if she's real, then you're a very little bard with only a lute, a dirk and a battered wizard between you and her.

But no time for doubt; she draws back her long dirty nails to strike at Gale and you dart towards her, bringing in the melody to a furious strike, feeling Karlach and Lae'zel in the magic around you.

"Hey! Hag!" The magic is clean and sweet on your lips. *"Heads up, you gross, disgusting rat!"*

The force of your magic as you swing your lute in the hag's direction is weak, but it has the intended effect; the image of Auntie Ethel vanishes, and she solidifies on the other platform just in time for Lae'zel's greatsword and Karlach's battleaxe to come swinging at her. Always the last illusion you check – how else would it work?

The hag screeches furiously as both slashes take chunks out of her magic defences; she lashes out with her claws, wisps of green rot-magic at her fingertips, buying her a little room from her attackers. Her other hand grasps the rotting staff, and she swings it around to cast some magic, but as she opens her flank Wyll appears, rapier in hand, and jabs; she brings the butt of her staff back in to block. Fending off Karlach and Lae'zel on one side, Wyll on the other, Astarion finally reappears. He bursts from the shadows and plunges a dagger into the hag's neck, making her shriek.

The sound is almost, but not quite, human-sounding. It has a keen, unnatural edge, as though the voice were hollow.

"You insects!" Auntie Ethel screeches. "I'll crush you!"

You're certain she's about to be swarmed, but she repeats her vanishing trick, this time exploding into bats, and the group scatters again. The bats give Auntie Ethel the chance she needs. She has a new set of four doppelgangers, and all of them are holding a little bottle of bright red liquid. They hold them up to you, as though to say, *cheers! Can't wait to kill you!*, and swig.

Healing potions! Why does the *hag* have those and not you?

Gale seems to be having trouble sitting up. He winces, hand on his belly, propping himself up against the cave wall. "Stop," he wheezes. "Don't... don't kill her..."

You take his arms, and he lets you pick him up, his hands sweaty and trembling. He stands, with your help, but keeps his hand on the wall and his torso hunched, as though his stomach were in pain.

"Why?" you ask. "What will happen if we kill her?"

Gale shakes his head in response. Instead he points a trembling hand past the hag, into the darkness behind her. "There's a lever..." he whispers, voice hoarse. "...The cage...there. Quickly..."

In her cage, dangling from the scene, you catch Mayrina's eyes. She's staring right at you and Gale, her eyes burning desperately.

"All right," you say. Gale nods, haggard, and you pick the melody back up, focusing your attention behind the battlefield.

The bats are gone, but Auntie Ethel is looking healthier than ever. The large, deep wound Astarion planted in her neck has vanished. she hasn't broken a sweat (if hags even sweat). Karlach has one cornered, taking brute swings with her axe as Wyll dances around her, jabbing and feinting, keeping the hag from regaining her footing.

"Aren't you two a lovely pair," she sneers, "The killer and the damned. Which one's which, do you think? Or does it make a difference?"

"It doesn't matter!" shrieks another Auntie Ethel. "They're both damned now!"

Lae'zel has another Ethel cornered too, but her sword is glancing off it like it's made of solid marble. Lae'zel's trying to concentrate, but a cut on her leg appears to be growing leaves and vines, rooting her to the ground. One Ethel is slashing its long nails at Astarion, who's looking much less confident and deadly now that he's out in the open, and another is wrestling with Shadowheart, attempting to throw her off the edge of the chasm.

Apparently these illusions pack a little more punch this time around, or she's just very good at making them all seem real as she swaps them around. You pick your way across the precarious stone platforms, beseeching your halfling ancestors for luck and smallness. None of the Ethels seem to notice you. Nobody but Mayrina; she's staring at you with her eyes wide, as though she's desperately trying to tell you something, warn you of something.

"Go...!" Gale stumbles behind you, one hand on the wall, one hand on his stomach. His voice is odd, strained. "Now...!"

You almost make it to the lever without interruption, but just before you can touch it, there's a wave of nausea in your stomach, and your vision clouds; you stumble, your skin itching as a cloak of magic falls over you like a curtain. Your playing falters, and with that, you lose track of the hag's location. You shut your eyes, hiding whatever illusion the hag is showing you; when you open them again, the pain is gone, and nothing looks different.

When you touch the lever, though, your hands are warty, green, long-fingered. She's turned you into her.

You manage to say, "Oh *shit*," before a blast of Wyll's crackling red magic comes barrelling at you and forces you to go diving away. It blasts the lever, blowing the entire thing to bits and showering you in shrapnel, which you don't have time to process because Shadowheart and Astarion both start taking potshots at you. It turns out both Astarion *and* Shadowheart can shoot fire from their hands, which is neat! You scramble to your feet and run as two bursts of fire explode at your heels, one after the other, each scorching through the clothes and skin on your legs and back. When you squeal, "*Stop!*" it comes out in the hag's croaking voice, and you curse.

So much for the lever. You need to run. You struggle to bring Lihala back into position, although you're not sure you can keep moving under these circumstances, let alone play a damn musical instrument. Manipulating the lute is hard.

A voice in your head, cold dry lips tickling the inside of your ear: "*Having trouble, my little lamb?*"

Your body does one thing, your eyes see another. The view is too high, your limbs are too long, and in the end you have to shut your eyes and make a chord by touch alone, hoping feverishly not to fall off a ledge.

Apparently, Auntie Ethel shutting her eyes and playing an invisible lute is an unusual enough sight for everybody to stop attacking you for a hot second. A wave of music, a song you don't remember starting. *Ever A Hero Be, Songs of the Sword Coast Vol. #39*. (The music is taking longer and longer to fade, harder to tell from reality. You don't know if you stopped playing at any point, or if you ever really started in the first place.)

The voice in your head takes on an angry screech: "*Stop playing that gods-damned song!*"

Auntie Ethel sloughs her way out of your image like a wet cloth and falls onto you with her claws.

You aren't sure what happens, only that the music suddenly intensifies and you struggle to keep up. But you don't miss a beat, and as long as you don't miss a beat then Ethel cannot touch you. She tears and rips, but her motions are slow, telegraphed, to your eyes.

"Oh, you're your mother's daughter, all right," hisses Ethel, "Clever, clever little girl. How much did she teach you, Evie? Did you keep listening to the last *rotten note?*"

Her magic, striking just where you were. her staff, whooshing past your face.

"Did you listen to her sing while she died, lovey?" Auntie Ethel's voice takes on a mocking sweetness. "Do you remember the words of her siren song? You can tell Auntie Ethel. After all, we helped her *write the thing!*"

That breaches past your mental barriers. It hits you like a deep, stabbing headache, and your fingers halter for barely a demiquaver but that's enough for her to drag a dirty claw down your cheek. You feel necrotic magic, sick and numb, oozing through your jaw.

Pain in the air; the notes of illusion, so strong you can taste it. Ethel is gaining the upper hand, and the more she gains the upper hand against your companions, the closer she pushes you to the ledge.

"Don't deny it, my love," whispers Auntie Ethel. "Were you excited to see me? To follow in her footsteps? Is that why you've surrounded yourself with murderers?"

The heel of your boot brushes the sea of void behind you. Pain radiates across your face, your jaw.

"If you had any sense, you'd walk away and leave your friend behind," croons Ethel. "With that Netherese orb in him? That wizard is more dangerous than your mother ever was."

What do you do with a dangerous wizard?

You take their stuff, tie their hands and gag them so they can't cast any spells. You don't let them run loose on the battlefield, acting as a distraction.

You raise your voice, hoping wildly. "Astarion!" you screech. "Set the cage on fire!"

Astarion, the magnificent bastard, doesn't question you: he obeys instantly. Auntie Ethel whirls around in anger, but Astarion has already launched a handful of flames into the bars, setting the occupant thoroughly on fire. Maryina, inside, rips the burning ropes from her hands and face, gives a single very understandable scream of pain, and teleports right out of the cage and onto the stone platform beside you. Flames burn through her green dress, her long hair; left behind, smoking and charred but unbound, is Gale. The Gale stumbling by the wall clutching his stomach shimmers, revealing the real Maryina underneath.

You were really hoping that freeing Gale would cause him to pop off some insane wizard shit to kill Auntie Ethel for you. Instead, what he does to help when he appears beside you is quickly swing his wooden staff at the hag, whacking her in the side of the head. Both of you bolt in different directions as the hag recoils.

Gale – the *real* Gale – raises his voice over the music and shouts, "Was that *entirely necessary*?"

"Forget it!" you shout. "What's the Netherese orb? Can it help us?"

"No! Not in the slightest!"

By now you have Lae'zel and Karlach, gleaming with still-fading healing magic, leaping into the fray. Each of them guards one of you; Lae'zel in her well-trained defensive stance in front of you, Karlach growling with her head lowered like a bull's with Gale behind her. Charging the hag herself is Wyll; he has painful-looking necromancy-wounds scoring his face and arms, and he's clearly favouring one leg over the other, but he still manages a smile and a cheeky, "*En garde!*"

"You're *nothing!*" screeches Ethel. "You think you'll be the hero to defeat me?! You can't even save *yourself!*"

Ethel falls on him with her claws, but Wyll's footwork is no match for the hag. He circles her, trapping her in a constant, slow twirl, forcing her to twist and lunge to keep close to him. He makes small, piercing jabs to her fingers, her sides.

Wyll says, with a flash of a grin, "And what does that make you?"

He manages to spear her in the shoulder. She gives a scream of fury, and this time, it's nothing like a woman's scream. It's a bestial, eerie, unnatural screech, produced by things that are too large and leafy to be lungs.

The scream makes Wyll stumble and clutch his head, and in that moment, Ethel reaches out and brushes one of her long green fingers over his eyelid.

That's all it takes. Wyll crumples to the ground, unconscious.

"*Wyll!*" screams Karlach. Rage is making her engine run louder and hotter than ever, a bright light in the darkness. She barrels her way towards him, but too late; this time, the hag bursts into a swarm of rats, and when four illusionary Ethels appear, each of them is standing over a different Wyll.

"You could have walked away," snarls Auntie Ethel, her voice emanating seemingly from the pits of the chasm itself. "You could have saved yourselves!"

The only person who rings uninjured in your ears is a perfectly unscathed Astarion. Lae'zel and Karlach are sprinting, but there's two of them, four hags. Gale jams his staff into the ground, firing a bolt of fire, but the hag he aims for ducks without missing a beat. In your ears you feel the high, sharp ring of Wyll's death, shrieking in your ears on approach. A minute, a second.

An unscathed Astarion? Ethel has the rest of you cut to ribbons and briefly transformed one of Lae'zel's legs into a beanstalk. How did Astarion do it?

That, bizarrely, makes you realise what you need to do.

"Ethel," you say, and your voice sounds weak and hollow in the battle-filled air. Again, with more feeling: "*Ethel!*"

She's pretending not to respond, all right. She's pretending to fight. But she can't *not* listen, not to you; her body doesn't run on physics, after all: it runs mostly on magic, Feywild energy leashed and wrapped into the shape of a decrepit old woman. She can't ignore your words any more than she can decorate her lair with flowers and perfume – that's not what she is.

Your voice sounds like someone else's as you call over the fighting. The music tells you what to say.

"Auntie Ethel, Sister of the Seeing Pearl!" you cry. "Hag of the Sunlit Wetlands, Scourge of the Emerald Grove! I am Evening Tavernsong, daughter of Sunrise Tavernsong, teller of tales, sole heiress of the lichnee-song, and I order you to *stand down!*"

That she can't pretend to ignore. She freezes. Your companions do too, the halt of the battle-song turning their heads and throwing off their rhythm for a moment. You're speaking nonsense – obviously – but the Weave is clearly listening, hanging on your words.

Auntie Ethel sneers, "And why the *fuck* would I do that?"

Good question, honestly. But you let no doubt creep into your answer.

"Because we both know you can't win, Ethel," you say. "You're in debt."

Nothing, for a moment.

Then Auntie Ethel says, "Am I, now?", her voice dripping with mockery. It's one of them speaking to you, now; the furthest one from Lae'zel and Karlach, the most defensible. At her feet, Wyll blinks awake, looks up, looks at you, and freezes.

The lull. It's very quiet now. You're alone on the stage, and if you don't perform this monologue right then Wyll's fate is on the line.

"You promised Astarion that you'd attempt to remove the tadpole," you say, "In exchange for something taken, and not missed."

Auntie Ethel spreads her palms. "And I took the wizard."

"So you stole a book."

A look passes over her face. Just a flash. A quiver of rage, a rumble of change in the Weave. Wyll, perhaps sensing the shift, scrambles to his feet.

"I don't know what you mean," she says sweetly.

"You misdirected Astarion by stealing a book, which he noticed, before he agreed to the deal," you say. "Stealing a book, from a guest in your home, without permission? That wasn't part of the agreement."

"Are you expecting me to spare your pathetic little lives over some scraps of parchment?" sneers Auntie Ethel.

"A theft, a lie, *and* a failure to complete the desired task," you say. "I wonder how much we can take from *you* in return?"

Her bluff wobbles.

"You wouldn't dare!" snarls Auntie Ethel, "You scheming, good-for-nothing, pointless waste of breath, I'll grind your bones to *dust*!"

"Would you rather owe me a favour, Ethel?" you ask.

A flicker of fear in her. When you're dealing with fae, a favour is the first step to servitude.

One moment the four illusions are sprinkled across the cave. The next, they're all standing – perfectly mirrored – on the flat stone floor in front of you.

One of the central ones tilts her head and looks at you, setting her apart from her doppelgangers, and a little thrill passes through you, standing hag to bard like this.

"Three gifts," you tell her, "And we may be able to call it even."

"I'm going to boil you alive," she growls, "I'm going to rip out your spine and shove it up your arsehole till it punctures your throat. I'm going to take you apart piece by piece and string you up like a garland!"

"Go ahead," you say, "But I get the feeling Astarion will just keep on getting luckier. Is that why you picked him? Because you thought he wouldn't come back, once he realised he'd been cheated? He didn't want to – but you weren't expecting us. That's why you keep offering us the chance to leave. Because your only way out was to negotiate a new bargain, one that would end in us leaving. Right?"

She hisses – vicious, animal, like an undead cat.

"Call me a liar," you tell her. "Go on. Call me a liar, swear on your heart that I'm wrong, and we'll walk away – no Gale, no Mayrina. Tell me I'm lying, Ethel, and you can even kill me right now."

She glares at you hatefully. But it's the same stiff-chinned, petulant glare of a stubborn child, the indignation of someone being given bullshit instructions by a hated authority.

She says nothing.

"Now then," you say, "The first gift. Gale."

The hag is completely unmoving. But one of her copies quietly fades away.

"The second gift," you say, "Mayrina."

Another copy, gone.

Never close a deal with a hag. Your palms sweat. The music got you this far, but now you're alone with your brain, things are a lot more complicated.

...And you're not sure you want to re-create your mother's methods *exactly*. There *is* a reason she's dead.

A third gift. You have every advantage, now. A hag's power at your disposal: talk about a poisoned chalice.

Nothing moves. The third illusion fades, unprompted, leaving the real Auntie Ethel standing, staring, very still and very cold. She has no need to breathe; when she stares at you, head very slightly tilted, she looks like a corpse, staring out with unseeing eyes.

"The only gift I have left to me," she says, "Is the truth. Will you take it?"

What the hells is that supposed to mean?

"...Will I regret it?" you ask.

She slowly shakes her head. "No," she says.

She can't lie.

Shit, shit, shit.

"Will you let us leave?" you ask.

"Yes," she says.

"Safely?"

"Yes."

Your nerves can't take much more. "Alright," you say, "Tell me the truth."

"Stand before me, Evening Tavernsong," she says. "You won't be harmed. ...I swear."

What can you do except obey? In a way, you're as much of a slave to the music as she is.

You walk until you're facing her. She towers over you. She squats down – thin legs, bloated body – to bring her long-nosed, misshapen face closer to yours.

When she speaks, her voice thrums with Weave. It creeps out of the chasm, the dark corners, the space behind your ears. She speaks in a harsh, cruel whisper, but it's loud enough to drown out a thunderstorm. Each word echoes in your skull, and even the tadpole stills for a moment, as though to listen.

"Your adventure," says Auntie Ethel, "Will end in chaos, destruction, and death. And your story, Eve, ends in the most devastating murder of all."

She glares down at you.

You can't react. She's just trying to get your attention – trying to get a rise out of you. Even if she's telling the truth. In a way, she's a lot like a small child.

"Understood," you say neutrally. "That will be all."

Auntie Ethel scowls.

"A *geas* upon you, you ugly, nasty, worthless little rodent," she says, "You've made an enemy of me. The next time we meet, one of us dies."

"...Okay," you say.

"And one more thing," she says, and gives you one more tooth-rotting smile. "For your troubles. The rats know the truth about Kagha."

"Thank you," you say, because you're too afraid to say anything else.

"Now, then." She spreads her arms. "It's really been lovely, but—"

Astarion appears and stabs her right in the heart.

He's fast. He gets one stab under the ribs, a second there just to be safe, a third in her stomach, and then, rapidly, one in each eye. You don't even have time to move. He peppers her torso with holes; his teeth are bared, and his movements swift and expert. Only until she's practically drooping off his daggers does he finally step back, sickly red dripping from his blades and staining his arms.

Astarion gives her one final kick and she collapses to the ground in a pool of blood.

"Not that I dislike your methods," he remarks to you, "But I thought I'd bring the mountain to Maglubiyet in this case, with that debt to me you mentioned. I like her a lot more dead than alive."

The Weave is perfectly silent.

You actually can't be arsed if this is a trick by Auntie Ethel. You're done. You fall to your knees, though you aren't sure whether it's the burns or the terror that makes your legs weak.

You say, in quiet terror, "Garl Glittergold's left *fucking* testicle, I can't believe that worked."

Astarion nudges the hag's body with his foot, rolling it over. It flops lifelessly on the ground.

You hear the sound of Karlach's engine sputtering, then falling silent. "Mayrina!" shouts Karlach. "Where's she gone?"

Gale points. "The hag's laboratory," he says. "It's the nearest way out, but... I'm led to believe that her late husband is stored somewhere inside. Best to give her a moment, I'd say."

In retrospect, the illusionary Mayrina-as-Gale was markedly pretty different to the real Gale. Even now, bruised and burned as he is, his words and gestures are perfectly deliberate. He hides his pain carefully, it seems, like a wounded rabbit.

"Eve," calls Wyll. He's limping, rapier dragging in the dirt, but he still calls out: "Are you alright?"

Your intestines feel like ice sculptures. "Fine," you say. "Great. Peachy. Nobody talk to me for at least five minutes or I'm going to scream."

"Got it," says Wyll. Nobly, you don't scream. "...Lae'zel, what are you doing?"

She's standing over the hag, lining up a shot with her greatsword.

"Taking her head as a trophy," says Lae'zel matter-of-factly.

Astarion gives an inexcusably cheerful-sounding laugh.

It does, admittedly, bring you some satisfaction to watch Lae'zel bring down her sword in a couple of well-poised strikes and cleave off Auntie Ethel's smug-looking head. It also reassures you that the illusions are gone. The chopping is so undramatic, so *meatlike*, that it can only be real life.

Shadowheart creeps out of the darkness, still whispering magic to herself. Karlach is spattered with blood, rotten leaves, and a strange green liquid you don't remember coming from anywhere.

The cave's atmosphere is strange with Auntie Ethel lying dead. It feels like a decorated stage after the performers have all gone home. Dressed-up, hollow.

"We're leaving," announces Astarion. "Sunlight. Now."

"Couldn't agree more," Gale says, cheerful as anything, as though his clothes aren't scorched black and he's not covered in bruises. "Follow me."

The hag's laboratory is too disgusting to be worth paying attention to. It's not until you're outside again, in the rancid bog you walked through to get here, that you see Mayrina and her late husband.

He's *very* late. As in, his clothes and skin and hair have rotted off, his teeth are showing, he smells like a tannery, he's *that* late. He's as dead as a doornail. He's the latest a husband can get without being a skeleton. He is also standing, upright, in front of Mayrina.

"Connor?" she says, pleading. "Connor? C-can you hear me?"

"Unnghhhh," gargles Connor, the rotting zombie husband.

"Oh dear," sighs Gale. "She found the wand." There is, sure enough, a very necromantic-looking wand in her hand.

She whips around to face you as you approach, newly-shed tears pouring down her face, ruining her already-ruined mascara. She doesn't look distraught so much as she looks pissed as hell.

"*You!*" she shrieks, and points an accusing finger at, paradoxically, Gale. "You've ruined *everything!*"

"That's an interesting, and very specific, accusation," mutters Gale, "Given that there are *seven* of us. Apparently."

"Hi," says Karlach apologetically, "I'm Karlach."

"If *you* hadn't shown up she'd still be alive!" shouts Mayrina. "Look what you've done to my husband!"

Gale says, with palpable exhaustion, "In my defence, I think it would be more accurate to say that *you* did that to your husband."

Mayrina slaps him in the arm. Honestly, though, neither of them look especially like their hearts are in it. Mayrina is overflowing with obvious redirected grief, and Gale looks like he has too much going on in life to care about an slap in the arm.

"Mayrina," says Wyll. "Let me guess. Auntie Ethel said she could bring your husband back."

"I didn't want him back like *this!*" Mayrina wails. "I want him back the way he was!"

Gale looks between the zombie and the wand a couple of times. Despite himself, he murmurs, "Powerful resurrection. He's still decomposing, but the spell is completely inert. He's completely obedient to the wand-holder. Not bad for a zombie familiar."

"Don't call my husband that!" she spits.

"Never mind that, Mayrina," you say, "Where's your family? Your home?"

Mayrina hesitates for just a moment. "I—I don't have any. Just me and my... my daughter."

"The daughter you were planning on giving to that hag?" sneers Astarion.

Maryina's fury intensifies. She's apparently the kind of person who copes by getting aggressive. "I had no choice! Nobody else wanted her, I couldn't raise her, I can't take care of a baby! She's got no parents, not ones that can raise her properly! Ethel said she'd teach her magic, that she'd be special!"

"Oh, just like she said she'd bring your husband back?" Astarion gives a haughty laugh. "Perhaps the baby *would* be better off with the hag! At least *she* had half a brain!"

"*Astarion!*" Wyll and Gale speak in unison.

"Don't mind them," you tell Mayrina, "Go to Baldur's Gate and find a necromancer to help you, maybe the Myrkulites. There's goblins on the road, but your – your husband can defend you."

Mayrina bristles. "Don't tell me what to do! Just– just leave me alone, all of you! Get away from us!"

Everybody seems pretty happy to do just that. Only Wyll lingers at the back, glancing at Mayrina and chewing his lip, before he follows along behind you.

The only sound as you walk is, unhappily, the sound of Auntie Ethel's head falling apart. It rots rapidly as Lae'zel carries it, bits falling off and slapping onto the ground, before she eventually just tosses it aside with a shrug and it collapses into bits.

You glance sideways and see a small fae hiding in the reeds. It's a squat, goblin-shaped, old-man-looking-creature with a floppy red hat and an expression of wild bloodthirst. It looks over, sees you, and opens its sharp-toothed mouth to scream: "*BAAAAAAAHH!*"

"I hate it here," declares Shadowheart.

"Agreed," you say.

Not until the swamp is behind you, screaming redcaps out of earshot and the smell faded except for the reek of your clothes, do you finally stop and rest.

You take your jar of rogue's morsels and fill it with water. you shake the mixture firmly, crack it back open, take a gulp, and pass it to the next person. It's a poor-man's healing potion, the lowest standard of herbal alchemy, but it beats bleeding into the grass.

You expect Gale to peel off his burned clothes, but he takes the more classy approach of snapping his fingers and causing a ripple of magic to pass over him, which takes care of the worst of the damage.

"Did you tell that woman to find the *Myrkulites*?" says Karlach.

You shrug. "The legal temples will smite that zombie on sight. She'll have to go black market."

"The Bone Lord doesn't seem like the kind of god to do happy miracles."

"I don't know," you say, "Shadowheart?"

Shadowheart shrugs. "I'd smite him too," she says. "I just think it'd be more sane than letting her wander around refusing to cope, referring to a soulless corpse as her husband. Nothing to do with Shar."

"Shar?" says Gale.

"She was grieving. Gods know parenthood is hard enough already," says Wyll, lying in the grass, eyes distant. "People make bad choices when they're desperate for help."

"Like when they have a mind flayer tadpole in them?" you suggest.

"I *said* I was sorry for losing Gale, that was an accident!" Astarion sighs, re-adjusting his hair. He doesn't look especially troubled. "The hag's magic was very convincing. You saw it for yourselves. I'm hardly to blame."

Gale frowns. "I don't remember you apologising."

"All's well that ends well, eh," says Karlach cheerfully. "Anyone got any water? I think I've got acid in my engine."

"Engine?" says Gale.

Shadowheart throws a lazy hand in the air. A black cloud forms around her fingers, drifts up over your heads, and showers everybody in about two heavy bucketfuls of cold water in a single shocking explosion.

You didn't make a peep in the hag's lair, but *that* makes you scream on pure instinct. You're not even that ungrateful, covered in hag-muck as you are. But it makes Karlach laugh uproariously, and then the others, and that brings something like a touch of normality to your weird little picnic. The sun outside the hag's swamp beats down with sweet, ferocious realness. You can pretend it all happened a very long time ago.

When you set out again on the path back to the grove, Gale falls into step with you. You have an inkling of what he might be interested in talking to you about: If he's as sharp a wizard as you suspect he is, then there's no way he didn't hear the hag talking about your mother like she'd known her.

But he only snaps his fingers, and the rivulets of cold water come off you in a single puff of steam, leaving you dry.

"Before you think me a man most ungenerous," he says grandly, "Thank you for saving me. Up to, and including, setting me on fire, which, considering the circumstances, was extremely clever and possibly even necessary."

The earnesty in his face hasn't budged an inch. His gratitude is very real, at least.

"You're welcome," you tell him. "I hope Ethel didn't hurt you."

"Ah. Well. No, not especially. No, it was very painless, as these things go. She was very...diplomatic." He shudders. "...Although I don't think I'm going to eat anything I didn't personally prepare for at *least* a week, if not ever again."

"That's a lot of cooking," you say.

"I never could resist a challenge. What have I missed?"

"A lot," you answer. "I'll catch you up back at the camp. And I have a few questions."

"I thought you probably would," Gale sighs. "I happen to have a handful myself."

"Gale," interjects Shadowheart, "Is drying us off instantly with magic the kind of thing you can only do once, or are you just letting the rest of us stay like this on purpose?"

Gale, of course, never even got wet in the first place. He gives you a little bow. "Duty calls," he says, grandiose as anything; but you notice as he leaves he fiddles with the fabric of his collar, grinds his palm into his chest, as though pained.

Chapter 9

By the time you get back to your campsite, it's almost dark. Catching Gale up doesn't take long. He's a remarkably quick study, unsurprisingly enough. He is patiently silent for most of your recounting the day's events. He recognised Karlach's name earlier, but said he'd thought questioning her presence in the party would be, "ungentlemanly".

Wyll chops you some wood, but he leaves you and Gale alone next to the unlit campfire afterwards. Wyll has been getting quieter and quieter as the time progresses. He says very little, except to reassure you that everything is fine.

"Infernal contract law," murmurs Gale thoughtfully. "I've read very little on the subject, and what I have read has made it clear how utterly dangerous the devils can be with the details. I don't envy Wyll one bit, that's for certain."

"He said he'd call his patron tonight," you say.

Gale shakes his head. "Talk about an inauspicious meeting...I suppose that all depends on what sort of devil she is. Wyll's been rather reticent with the details."

"Everyone seems reticent with the details around here," you say, "If he's a kettle, we're pots."

Neither of you have mentioned Sunrise Tavernsong *or* the Netherese orb since Ethel. "Point taken," Gale concedes. "What have we got in terms of ingredients? Lae'zel found some dried sausages in a cart, I'm told."

"You weren't serious about cooking today?"

"Bad enough to have a mind flayer spawn in one's head *without* the indignity of eating food cooked by other people. The world is tragically full of cooks with low standards."

You have nothing to argue here. Your standards are very low. "If you insist," you say.

"Shadowheart and I traded some gold for ingredients, but there's not a lot to go around."

Gale claps his hands together neatly, then makes a circle with his palms. First in transparent blue light, then solidifying into a physical object, he summons a soup-pot. "Never let it be said," he grins, "That wizardry never put food on the table."

"We don't have a table."

He flexes his wrist and conjures a small, low wooden table, just about big enough for him to place the pot upon. He's even given it ornamentation, and put little carvings of birds on the table-legs. He beams, evidently very pleased with himself.

"I'm surprised you can't just conjure a whole dinner," you tell him.

"Now, where would the fun in *that* be? Besides, too much illusionary food is bad for the digestive system."

"I think Phyl from the kitchens at work once told me that."

Gale smiles and nods. He's all sunshine now. It's like Auntie Ethel never happened to him. He's as neatly put-together as always. It's funny; you've known these people for not very long at all, but enough has happened to fill a month or two, it feels. Gale feels like an old acquaintance by now, a familiar colleague. Even he and Karlach seem to be familiar now; you spotted them laughing together not long after you arrived. Accepting everything as normal very quickly seems to be a popular strategy all around.

Gale rolls up the sleeves of his robe and sorts through the sack of food that you and Shadowheart bought earlier. He brings out handfuls of ingredients; large onions with rapidly-growing roots, old potatoes, sprigs of wild garlic and wood sorrel that Shadowheart picked.

He continues to speak as he rummages. "I'm fortunate that the kitchen staff at Blackstaff were open-minded, at least. I was a very precocious child, and it's a miracle they could get me to eat at all. But the cooking was never as good as my mother's."

"There's nothing more sacred to a boarder than their mum's cooking," you say. "The ones who go home for summer, at least. And whose mothers don't have servants to cook for them."

Gale quirks an eyebrow. "The Unrolling Scroll Temple Academy doesn't close for summer?"

"Most of the classes do. There are parents who want their children educated year-round, though." You give a shrug. "And the priests are willing to accept their money."

"I can't imagine my mother consenting to such a thing when I was a boy. She always says I spent too much time reading as it was."

"No," you say, "Nor mine. But you'd be shocked, the amount of parents who struggle to look after a child for three months a year."

Gale magicks himself a knife and a chopping board. You half-expect him to have some magic way around actually chopping and cooking. He doesn't, though, and starts preparing the vegetables the normal way, with his hands.

"Yes," he says. His eyes have taken on a soft thoughtfulness. "I can imagine. You must deal with a lot of homesickness."

"Plenty. A hug and a cup of warm milk can do a lot, for some children. But not all."

You rub your fingertips together. Your hands are hard, rough, already with lute-playing calluses forming. You've been on the road so little time, and your hands are already so different.

"I suppose if the Academy closed during the normal times, I might never have been taken by the Nautiloid," you muse aloud. "As it was, there weren't that many pupils to be looking after."

Gale is silent for a moment, just nods in response. In a way, talking to him reminds you of the Academy. Most of your coworkers there were some breed or another of posh wizard.

Already that feels like another life. In contrast, your memories of being a child are sharply in focus. Your career – the life you've spent the last two decades building – feels petty and dull, compared to the danger and magic that has followed you since the Nautiloid. As though it were just some interlude between adventures.

What would your mother say? – no, no. Put her out of your head for tonight.

"I still can't believe you're a matron, you know," Gale remarks eventually. "You should have seen yourself facing down Auntie Ethel – you were formidable. Storm Silverhand herself would be proud. How did you get so...?"

You don't care to let him finish. "Is it so strange that a matron knows magic?" you say. "Lots of people know magic."

"Not in the slightest. Just that you're very good at it, for a civilian. But if being a matron is your life's calling, then, well, who am I to tell you any different?"

You frown. "We're all *civilians*," you say, "There's no war."

Gale glances up at the fading sky. The stars are beginning to appear, in the darkest parts of the horizon.

"That's the part that troubles me," he says gloomily, "I'm not sure there isn't."

Lae'zel emerges from her tent, nods at you, and wanders off searching for Wyll. When she's out of her armour, she looks more alien than ever. Her plate mail is replaced by an outfit of leather and straps in odd places, showing off an amount of yellow-green skin that would probably make your Da blush. Nobody bats an eyelid at this. Shadowheart is wearing clothes she obviously intends to sleep in, and that aside you're all sharing a single campsite, so privacy seems like a lost cause anyway.

You watch Gale splitting onions into slices with deft, expert familiarity. His knife and board look perfectly normal. Much like Auntie Ethel's, his illusions are indistinguishable from the real thing.

He hums thoughtfully to himself.

"The hag hinted at something like this, and I'm inclined to trust you with the information anyway," Gale says, "So, I have a confession to make."

That makes you raise an eyebrow.

He continues, "I have a condition. Nothing urgent, or debilitating, just... difficult to treat."

"A condition?" you ask. "Like a medical condition, or a...a *status* condition?"

"Closer to the latter," says Gale grimly. "But something like the former. Treating it has taken up much of my time in the last year."

He tosses handfuls of chopped vegetables into the pot as he speaks.

"A disease?" you ask. "Or a curse? Is it magical?"

"Inextricably. The only way to stop it flaring up is by constant supply of magic – firstly from my body, then from magic objects." He doesn't look up. His eyes remain focused on his chopping, and his tone is as calm and normal as ever. "As long as it's treated with magic artefacts, it's benign. If not, then... well, the results would be rather deadly, put it that way."

You nod. That sounds like a wizard problem. High-level wizardry brings you into contact with some of the world's most esoteric deadly diseases.

"That sounds like a very expensive condition," you say.

Gale smiles. "I picked it up in Waterdeep. Nothing there comes cheaply."

"Is it something to do with the orb the hag mentioned?"

"Related, yes," says Gale. "I'm afraid it's a secret for that reason. Suffice it to say that the circumstances are...sensitive."

"Ethel said our tadpoles had been altered by Netherese magic," you say, "Then she mentioned the orb. Could the perpetrators be connected?"

Gale shakes his head slowly, a sad smile spreading across his face. "I'm afraid the perpetrator in the first instance was me," he says, "And I haven't the slightest idea how one would go about altering a mind flayer tadpole. They appear to be unrelated events... or at the very least, I sincerely *hope* they're unrelated."

You watch in silence as Gale finishes his chopping. He flexes his wrist, makes a flourishing gesture over the pot, and conjures a handful of fragrant-smelling herbs, which he drops in; another gesture, and clean water begins to run from the palm of his hand like a wellspring. You say, suddenly feeling very unhelpful, "Can I give you a hand?"

"Not at all. You've worked hard enough today, by the sounds of it." He shoots you a smile. "You just sit back and let me work my magic."

Lae'zel reappears, Wyll in tow. The sight of food being prepared makes her nod in approval. Shadowheart finishes her nightly routine of prayer and reflective silence, and switches over to sharing a bottle of terrible wine with Astarion. Karlach wanders over to you and squats by the freshly-constructed campfire, and says, "Need a light?"

"That's alright, thank you," says Gale, pointing a finger at the kindling. "I've always had a way with fire."

He snaps his fingers, preparing to summon a spark.

He begins, "When—"

The campfire explodes into a bonfire that sends Gale and Karlach both diving backwards in alarm. The flames form a column several feet high, and roar with an unnatural ferocity, as though bloodthirsty. You freeze. (This is not your proudest moment.)

Lae'zel draws a knife from somewhere on her scantily-clad person – githyanki sleepwear apparently comes with weaponry in mind. You can't see Karlach through the flames, but you hear her *growl* a wordless sound of anger. Your tongue sours with the taste of sulphur and brimstone and the bitter magic of Avernus.

Only Wyll, approaching the unnatural bonfire, doesn't look surprised. That's not to say he looks calm. He simply looks terrified in a way that is very resigned.

The burning logs begin to melt, forming a black, shiny ooze at the base of the flames. The ooze grows and warps into an oily column, which morphs until it's the size and shape of a person. All at once the oil burns off in a rush of red-hot flame, and left standing in the bonfire is a devil.

The sight of her sends a thrill through you. You can't tell if you're being magically charmed or just plain old terrified. She has purple skin, red hair, gold chains draped on her horns and scalp. her wings are fleshy and enormous, by both her height and wingspan she's several times the size of you.

She looks down at you regally and smiles. Distantly you're aware of Karlach, rushing to your side. you only regain the ability to move when Wyll crosses your line of sight, putting himself between you and then devil, and you scramble the hell away from them, Infernal magic shooting up your nerves and frying your senses.

"Pardon the surprise appearance, Wyll," purrs the devil, her voice honeyed and dripping with insincerity, "But I simply had to see the look on your face when you realised you weren't getting away with your *catastrophic* failure to kill Karlach. Are these your friends? How sweet."

Wyll says, through gritted teeth, "Mizora."

Mizora readjusts her wings. The slightest motion brings her drifting upwards, and she looks over Wyll's head, examining each of you one by one. Karlach is stepping back, shifting her weight like she's getting ready to attack. The rest of you cluster back, all poised for combat. Not Wyll, though. He has his fists clenched and his back straight, as though forcing himself to stay perfectly still.

"Fuck you," snarls Karlach, "Fuck you and the asshole of hell you crawled out of. You're just another one of Zariel's cronies, you don't fucking scare us."

There is something frightening about hearing Karlach's voice, ordinarily so happy and friendly, speaking with so much pure, distilled hatred.

"Karlach! I *have* been curious to meet you." Mizora's red eyes flash with amusement. "Speaking of Zariel, she sends her regards. She was really quite heartbroken when you vanished – one of her favourite champions! Between you and me, I think she's gone a bit sentimental."

"What do you want, Mizora?" growls Wyll.

Mizora waggles a clawed finger at Wyll. "Tsk, tsk," she says, "That's no way to speak to your master. Now, *heel*."

She yanks an imaginary leash. Wyll *lurches*. He chokes, his hands flying to his neck as an invisible force pulls him forward, forcing him to his knees.

Karlach's engine whirrs furiously.

"You've been *disobedient*, haven't you, pup? I gave you a very clear order." Mizora smirks down at Wyll, writhing in the dirt before her bonfire. "You were supposed to kill Karlach. You weren't supposed to start playing *happy families* in the wilderness with her."

She flexes her fingers. Wyll gasps in a lungful of air, panting, but immediately chokes out his response: "You – lied! I only – hunt – devils!"

Mizora gives a deep sigh. She gestures, and the flames swirl around her hand, producing within the maelstrom a long, long piece of parchment. She leafs through the parchment, tutting to herself, and eventually finds what she's looking for. "*Clause G, Section 9,*" she rattles off, "*Targets for extermination by the pact-holder shall be limited to the infernal, the demonic, the heartless, and the soulless.* I'm afraid your new friend is about as heartless as they get – which means, as per the contract, that you *failed your mission*, pup. Someone's been a bad dog."

You hear Wyll take in a shuddering breath. Terror is writ into the set of his shoulders, the flit of his eyes.

"Leave him alone," growls Karlach, "It's me you want!"

Mizora tuts. "Oh, don't worry. You're off the hook – Zariel's decided to let you live for now. She seemed to think you wouldn't be staying in this plane for very long, anyway." Mizora pantomimes a shrug. "How strange! I couldn't say why."

That clearly catches Karlach off-guard. she hesitates. Mizora returns her attention to Wyll.

"Which just leaves *me* with the question of how to punish Wyll for his disobedience. Let me see... We won't go full Lemure Transformation this time, but how about a little taste of what happens *next* time you fail your duties?"

The fire goes red. A wave of transmutation washes over you, so strong it makes your skin tingle and crawl like it's coming to life. The smell and heat of Avernus is so intense, it's like being right back on the Nautiloid again, and distantly, in the nine-layered chaos, you hear the sound of Wyll screaming.

For a terrible moment you think he's being burned alive. He splits apart, on some terrible level you can't describe. Mizora gestures, a smug, sadistic smirk spread across her face, as she plays with the fabric of his existence like it's a children's toy. She flexes her claws, twitches her wings, and Wyll reforms back where he was, panting and gasping.

He's different. Ridges mark his face and score his arms. His nails now end in sharp, pointed claws. Two large, black, curling ram's horns sprout from his forehead; onyx-black, glossy devil's horns, undeniably fiendish. His stone eye is unchanged, but his real eye is now black as night, his single iris a bright bloody red.

You hear Wyll croak, "What have you done?"

"A little reminder as to who you *really* belong to," purrs Mizora. "You can run about with your friends playing Hero of the Sword Coast if it makes you happy, Wyll dear, but make no mistake. If you don't do what you're told, you – are – *nothing*."

Wyll touches his head, his eye, feels the tips of both horns, the look of horror on his face growing as he realises the body he's returned to isn't quite his own.

Mizora laughs. "Oh, don't *pout*, Wyll! I'm sure the famed Blade of Frontiers can get by just fine without his pretty face. Get used to the new form, darling, because there's no going back from *that* little sojourn through the hells. Believe me – next time will be *much* worse."

"You're just a bully, you know that?" Karlach spits. "You're like a spiteful, shitty little kid with a rich mum to hide behind."

"Oh, I *can* see why Zariel liked you," Mizora says. "Enjoy your freedom, Karlach Cliffgate... while it lasts."

Karlach's engine coughs smoke. "Fuck you," she snarls.

"Anyway, *lovely* meeting you all," Mizora purrs, with a cheerful little wave. "I'll let you get back to it. Do take care of my warlock for me, won't you? After all, it's *my* magic he's using to help you, so I'll know *exactly* what you're getting up to." She gives a wink. "Ta-ta for now!"

Her tail curls flirtatiously, the flames surge around her, and then abruptly the entire blaze dies completely. The bonfire winks away, leaving behind only charred, smoking remains and the lingering smell of sulphur.

There's an air of shocked awe in the campsite, not least because your soul is still certain it's been dragged to eternal damnation and is still screaming.

Wyll doesn't stand. He kneels in the dirt, still, staring down at his hands. His new horns curl over his head and along each side of his skull. They're graceful, in a way. He hasn't quite lost his handsomeness so much as it's taken on a very devilish visage. But his face has changed enough that it's uncanny for you to look at, all the same.

Karlach kicks the smouldering remains of the fire. She shows no sign of pain, not even when it becomes clear her boots are burning.

"Fucking – *devils!*" she spits, and extinguishes the last ember.

The hellfire in your stomach burns down to a gentle low. You shuffle forward and lay a hand on Wyll's arm, and his skin is both hotter and rougher than it once was. Bumps and ridges line his elbows and the backs of his forearms.

You half-expect him to start crying, the way he's sitting like that. But instead he simply leans his head back, and lets out a long, slow sigh.

"I'm alive," he says, "So is Karlach. We're both alive." And he squeezes your hand.

Karlach says, "Wyll, I—"

"It's fine," says Wyll, "It's fine. Really." He gets to his feet, brushes down his trousers, adds, "I'll go and get more firewood, shall I?", and promptly walks off.

"Wait!" says Karlach, scrambling to her feet.

Wyll can make himself scarce remarkably fast. Both of them are gone before anyone can really stop them.

Gale edges back to the campfire. He looks over the burned-out kindling, frowning, then gingerly lifts the lid of the lid of his soup-pot like he's checking to see if any of the Hell has gotten into it.

"Well," he says, frowning at his chopped vegetables. "She was... quite something."

"I'm not exactly thrilled with the idea of her watching us through Wyll's eyes – or, well, *eye*, I suppose," says Astarion. "That's the thing about warlocks, isn't it? There's always a catch."

"Look at what she did to him," says Shadowheart. She keeps her mace close, even though Mizora's completely gone. "Transformed in an instant. It sounded horrible."

Lae'zel shrugs, re-sheathing her knife. "His body and powers are both intact," she says. "A more favourable outcome than death. He knew the consequences when he broke his oath."

"I suppose *you* would just kill whoever you'd been told to without question," mutters Shadowheart.

"I do not take orders from devils. But if it had been my mission, I would not have failed." Lae'zel sneers. "Mercy is a distraction from efficiency – about which you seem to know very little, *kainyank*."

"Both of you, please!" says Gale. "Not tonight. Gods know enough has happened already."

Astarion rolls his eyes, gives a singsong "Bor-ing!" and vanishes. Lae'zel and Shadowheart both frown in annoyance, but they obey. Lae'zel falls silent and Shadowheart returns to her tent.

Gale examines the ashes of the campfire. Mizora really did just eviscerate it.

"A visit from a devil," he murmurs, seemingly more to himself than you. "You know, if I were a mind flayer, and I were attempting to escape an attacking Githyanki fleet, I wouldn't have chosen Avernus as my safe haven. Nor, come to think of it, would I stop to pick up any passengers, especially ones as weighted in the Infernal War as Wyll and Karlach."

"What are you getting at?" you ask him.

"Only adding another mysterious coincidence to the growing list that plagues us," he says. "Now what? Having killed a hag and watched a man be partway transformed into a fiend in a single day, we proceed to sit here and make soup as though nothing is wrong?"

You say, "What else can we do?"

He furrows his eyebrows for a moment, frowning. "Well... nothing, I suppose."

"Then start cooking, wizard," Lae'zel orders. "You can speculate while you work."

"But there's no firewood," you point out.

Gale snaps his fingers and creates a new campfire over the ruins of the old one, no fuel needed.

"That's twice now Wyll has gone off chopping wood for you," you say accusingly.

"I don't ask him to do it." Gale says, and shakes his head. "He just does it anyway."

The night is, thankfully, blissfully quiet compared to the whitewater-rapid-pace of the daytime. Karlach and Wyll return, both acting as though nothing in particular has happened, and nobody says a word about how long it's been or the fact the cooking happened completely without their assistance. At least Gale's cooking is a lot better than Oкта's.

"Tomorrow," declares Lae'zel, "We launch our search for the Archdruid Halsin."

Lae'zel is shockingly gifted at eating voraciously while speaking passionately, yet never appearing to have her mouth full. Between her and Karlach, they eat enough to feed two small racehorses, and at about the same speed.

"What, tomorrow?" complains Astarion. "Can't we take a break? We've done nothing but *adventure* since the damn ship fell out of the sky."

"Which happened not *two days ago*," snaps Lae'zel, "And no, we cannot! Our priority must be curing the infection. Any time we spend languishing is wasting the precious little we have left."

"Halsin's notes suggest we have as much time as we please. Besides, we know where Halsin is – he's locked in a goblin stronghold in a temple to the west, along with one of the Grand Dukes, apparently." Astarion waves a hand. "It's not exactly the kind of place we can just waltz into unprepared, is it? We may as well take a day or two off first."

"How would we prepare?" you ask him.

He scowls. "Well, don't ask *me*. I assumed one of you would take care of the specifics."

"Walking there would probably be a good shout," says Karlach.

"We could also try walking quietly, if you wanted to be *really* strategic," says Shadowheart.

Lae'zel rolls her eyes. "You cretins would not have survived a single day in Crèche K'liir."

"Alright, Lae'zel, what would you suggest?" you say.

She hesitates. "Information," she says. "We need to know more. What to expect."

"And on which dragon were you planning to ride for that particular scouting mission?" says Astarion. "That sounds a hell of a lot like, 'Let's walk in and have a look around.'"

There's a hint of uncertainty in Lae'zel's response, as she begins to say, "We proceed with stealth—"

"And what shall we disguise ourselves as, awakened shrubs? It's all very well saying we'll *'be stealthy'*, but for all we know they've got lookouts posted in the sky and a Mordenkeinen's Mansion for a prison. This isn't – whatever twisted military prison you grew up in," Astarion waves a hand, "We don't have resources, information – we don't have any of the things that make strategizing worth it. We've got *legs*. We might as well bloody use them."

"I feel like we're missing a step between 'getting there' and 'rescuing Halsin,' here," says Gale, "What do we do in the circumstance that, say, the goblins attempt to capture us on sight?"

"Don't get captured," suggests Karlach.

Astarion says, "Exactly! Be careful, have a look around, don't get kidnapped, and if it all goes pear-shaped just start killing goblins until the problem goes away. We've done it once before. How many of them can there be?"

"A lot?" you suggest.

"Hundreds, for example," says Shadowheart.

"Goblins don't live in large groups like that, generally speaking," says Gale.

"They don't usually strategise well enough to pigeonhole a whole grove of people into hiding, either," says Shadowheart, "Best not to assume."

"Yeah, and they've gone in for that new religion," says Karlach, waving her spoon. "The Absolute."

"And Kagha," you say, "Forgot about her."

"Yeah, and what's with all the gnolls on the high road? Why aren't they bothering the goblins?" says Karlach.

"And a much bigger question than all of that," says Gale, "Who, or what, is behind the Netherese magic infused in our mind flayer tadpoles?"

Wyll makes a good show of nodding along with the discussion, but he's not at all listening, and you notice everyone is much worse at staying on track now that he's not speaking. Lae'zel seems to be losing control of the conversation, and you can see her ire growing for every little remark off-topic.

"I'm not rescuing Halsin if it's raining," announces Astarion. "Why don't we wait and see what tomorrow is like?"

Nobody seems to have any better ideas than that.

When you crawl into your musty bedroll that night, it seems unlikely that tomorrow will contain enough sleep for you to stop being tired. Still a constellation of aches and pains radiates across your body, but you can feel yourself getting used to it, slipping back into a routine. The night is warm and blissfully quiet.

When you dream, you dream of your mother and of dancing hags, and the Song.

Tomorrow does not, in fact, contain enough hours for you to sleep until you are no longer tired.

You are awoken by Lae'zel. If you were uncertain about Lae'zel's sense of privacy, you would have gained clarity on the subject by waking up with her squatting over you in her little leather githyanki bra, shouting, "Arise!" in a way that would be better suited to a military barracks than here. As it is, you are not surprised, just disappointed to be awake.

"What time is it?" you groan.

"It is no longer night," she answers, tersely. It occurs to you that there's no House of Wonders here, so there are no clocks and ringing bells to tell the time by. "You slumber heavily. Were someone to attack you in your sleep, you would be helpless to stop them."

You rub your eyes and squint at her for a moment, your dreams fading from your memory. "And you'd wake up, would you?" you grumble.

"I keep a constant vigil even in sleep – I would never be caught off-guard so easily."

"Well, wake me up if someone attacks me in the night, then."

She rolls her eyes in a way that might be good-natured and *might* be purely irritated, and backs out of your tent. Wyll built you a human-sized tent, meaning Lae'zel has plenty of space to interrupt you in. "Take your bedroll," she instructs you, "We march to the west as soon as possible."

It's still pretty early, by the look of the sun at least, sparing you any embarrassment over oversleeping. You can see why Lae'zel accused you of sleeping heavily; most of the others are awake already. Gale is lighting a (non-magical) cookfire, Shadowheart sits in the sunlight, and Wyll and Karlach are standing in the centre of the campsite...

"...What are you two doing?" you call.

They're holding a stick each. Wyll keeps his hand behind his back, like a fencer. Karlach wields hers like a club. They're facing each other, sticks crossed.

"Good morning!" says Wyll, which doesn't answer your question.

"Playing childish games," scoffs Lae'zel, who is far more interested in Gale and the contents of his frying pan than Wyll and Karlach.

Karlach raises her stick-club in the air and shouts, "I call it *Horny Basics!*"

"You can't say that out loud," you say, affronted.

"Horns! They're a fact of life!" Karlach gestures to the horns on her head – that is, her curling left horn and what little remains of her right. It's mostly a filed-down stub. "Extra weight, extra weaponry! It's a horny, horny world!"

"I think I'm just about learning to account for the extra weight," chimes in Wyll, "But there's a whole host of horn-based techniques Karlach has yet to teach me."

In the sunlight, while he's sparring with Karlach, it's much easier to look at Wyll. He's not so different, necessarily. His new red eye has much the same twinkle as the old one. But still it's strange to see what looks like a devil cheerfully playing swords with a stick.

"The stab! The gouge! The gut-and-run!" Karlach tosses her head like a bull's for emphasis. "That's all part of the Horny Basics!"

"Do you have to call it that?" you ask.

Astarion says, from a spot behind your shoulder that you were certain was empty, "Of course she does. What are you, dead inside?"

"How do you keep doing that?" you say. "It's like you appear out of thin air."

"I've been here the whole time, darling," says Astarion, "You just weren't looking hard enough."

Everyone seems very cheerful this morning, which troubles you, because it's very early and you don't think anyone should feel joy at this sort of hour.

Off to the side Shadowheart is sitting by herself by the supply-crates, her hands cupped around something small but thankfully hidden. It's funny; with seven of you occupying the same space, and with enough time and trauma bonding you together, you've scattered across the place in knots, just like schoolchildren. Here's the two playful, loud ones. Here's the quiet one sitting in the corner, making herself small.

Is it really like this, or are you just used to seeing schoolchildren everywhere you look? No, you decide. The schoolyard is just a smaller version of life.

"Morning," you say to Shadowheart, mostly to warn her of your approach, but she still freezes for a moment before she realises it's you. Her hands relax, and she lets the silver spokes of the artefact show through her fingers. You ask, "What are you doing?"

"Nothing," she says. "I mean... What I'm trying to do is open the artefact, or get a look at what's inside. What I'm achieving is nothing."

You lower your voice.

"Why are you trying to open it?" you whisper. "Aren't you supposed to be taking it to Baldur's Gate?"

That makes her clutch it to her chest and glare at you. "Yes, of course!" she says defensively. "And I plan to. But it'd make me feel a lot more secure if I knew what it was and what was inside it, and more importantly, why everyone seems to be looking for it."

"Including Lae'zel," you say. "That seems like a problem we have now."

She nods. "I'll... take care of it, don't worry," she says. "Make absolutely sure you don't tell anyone."

"I won't," you say. "Have you figured anything out about it?"

She frowns. The artefact hovers on her palm, bobbing expectantly, like an obedient dog.

"It feels like there's something living inside it," she says, "It moves, but it's... irregular. Organic. I don't know how it opens."

"Well, stop playing with it and put it in your bag before someone sees it."

She gives a huff of exasperation, but she obeys. She stows the artefact out of sight again. Lae'zel's attention is absorbed by Gale, and she doesn't notice you at all.

When you were little, you had a copy of *The Illustrated Tales of Balduran*, which depicted Balduran and his adventurers foraging bountiful feasts right from nature as a kind of wild rite of manhood. The reality is rather less glamorous. Gale groggily hands you a sausage stuck on a fork.

"Is this real?" you ask.

"The fork? No, but I'm excellent at multitasking, so it shouldn't be a problem." He yawns. "This is nothing, really. It used to be that I could conjure an entire replica of my own library, before the tadpole."

If this is a humble brag, then Gale is doing a very good job making it sound nonchalant. He must be good. He does not look like a man who is currently concentrating on several forks.

You sit on a stone, taking careful piping-hot bites of sausage, and watch the colour filling the sky. The sausage tastes of pimentón and spicy pepper, and thankfully nothing like dirt or gnoll-blood, and that's about as much as you can hope for.

When Wyll and Karlach finish sparring and present themselves for sausages, Gale says, "Doing all right, are you, Wyll?"

"Fine, thank you," says Wyll, and that is the only acknowledgement of what happened last night that transpires. Otherwise, breakfast passes without comment.

Gale has an annotated copy of one of Zevlor's maps sketched in his notebook, and at Lae'zel's command he copies it onto several sheets of loose parchment. He draws effortlessly fast, but nonetheless, every map is meticulously identical. The river is always the same shape, the settlements always exactly the right distance apart.

"Even if we keep up a good pace, that looks to be most of a day's walk. The Selûnites built the place well," says Gale, "There's no easy way in except by walking right through the front door, in the dip of a valley."

"Not well enough to keep it safe from goblins," scoffs Shadowheart.

"If these goblins have been infiltrated by the cult of the Absolute," says Wyll carefully, "Then, based on what Nettie said and the dead man from yesterday, we're one of them. If they've got Halsin, they might just tell us – same with the githyanki artefact."

"Then let's hope they don't ask too many questions in return," you say.

"Right." Gale grimaces. "We'll just have to proceed with caution. Anything else?"

"Man in river," says Karlach.

"What?"

She points. Splashing through the stream, walking slowly towards you with an old man's shuffle, is a withered skeleton in scribes' robes.

There's a moment of palpable bafflement.

"Is that – Withers? What on earth?" says Shadowheart.

Lae'zel grabs her sword, but nobody else makes a move to defend themselves. Withers, aside from his ability to casually emerge from the bed of a stream like it was the top of a staircase, appears pretty harmless.

"I proclaimed that I would assist you on your journey," he says, his dead, withered face solemn. *"And so, here I am, beholden to your service."*

Gale springs from his seat. "What do you mean?" he says. "Who are you?"

"Ineffable," says Withers, *"And beyond the limits of thy mortal imagination."*

"And what are you doing here?" Gale seems more excited than annoyed. He has his notebook in one hand, pencil raised in the other.

"I will be here when you have need of me," says Withers, *"The threads of fate have long been arranged so."*

"That's rather vague. Let's see; robes from several centuries ago, in a religious tomb of skull iconography, in the clothes of a scribe?" Gale looks over Withers, eyebrows raised. "That narrows down the list of gods that you could represent to a rather slim number. Were you summoned? Conjured?"

"The answering of questions is not one of the services I provide," says Withers.

"What services *do* you provide?" you say.

"You will learn when you need them."

"Are you going to provide any more information? Any at all?" asks Gale.

"No."

"Then why are you here?" snaps Shadowheart.

"A gift," says Withers, *"And a warning. The first, here."*

Withers takes from his robes a small, battered cloth satchel, a small unremarkable thing made of unbleached linen. He holds it out to Gale, who takes it, tests its weight experimentally, and then peeks inside. He frowns, tips the bag upside-down, and shakes. It's empty.

"That's the gift," says Gale, "What's the warning?"

The withered skeleton calmly places his hands behind his back. Gale looks through, not at, the skeleton. He peeks over Withers' shoulder, examines his eyeballs one at a time. Withers doesn't seem to mind. His dry, old-man voice sounds as unbothered as ever.

"The path of fate has twisted. The Rite of Thorns has been disrupted," he says. "In a matter of minutes, the druids and refugees will take up arms and begin to slaughter each other."

Gale and Wyll speak simultaneously. Wyll stands immediately, saying, "Where?" as Gale splutters, "What? Why?"

Withers tilts his impassive, wrinkled face. He doesn't care to speed up his response.

"Yesterday, the child, Arabella, unwittingly took a relic of the Oak Father. With her theft, her soul made contact with the outer planes. This is as it should be." Withers spreads his palms. *"Yet today, the Idol of Silvanus, the holy symbol of the grove, has been destroyed where it stood."*

"Destroyed? By whom? By *what*?" There's a certain edge to Gale's voice, the glint in his eyes. It's something like anger, something like fascination. "You know what's going on here, don't you?"

"Never mind that!" shouts Wyll, who scrambles for his rapier and scabbard, grabs them, and sets off at a brisk run, Karlach hot on his heels. Gale looks from Withers to the receding Wyll, then back at Withers, frown deepening, before he comes to a decision and follows after Wyll.

Lae'zel, Shadowheart and Astarion stare after them. None of them look especially urgent.

"Are we not going to run?" you ask.

Shadowheart scowls. *"You can run. We'll be right behind you. At walking pace."*

You hesitate, sigh, and settle on going at a brisk jog. Withers sits calmly by the campfire, unbothered as anything, and doesn't look up as you leave.

The morning is eerily quiet as you pick your way across the grassy hill that separates your camp from the Hollow. The encampment is practically deserted. The Weave hangs low and tense in the air today, like a coiled snake.

When you arrive at the stone circle, Wyll has his rapier drawn and his arm spread protectively in front of Arabella's parents. For a terrible moment you think Wyll has gone full Rashemi Berserker and started fighting the druids single-handedly. Luckily, there seems to be no actual fighting, for the moment.

A throng of about twenty people surround the druids' standing stones, clustered into druids and tieflings. They stare agog, as one, at the centre of the stone circle, where yesterday the druids were dancing circles around a polished stone statue.

It's not quite right to say the Idol of Silvanus is broken. It might be more accurate to say that it's *hatched*, like an egg. Warped chunks of stone are still visible in parts; the rest has exploded into black, twisting vines, pulsating with a dark, uncomfortable magic, growing at an alarmingly rapid pace. The grass withers and rots as the vines grow and spread, pooling out of the circle like the steady approach of the tide. Cocooned in the vines, shaking and crying and struggling for air, is Arabella. Her eyes glow a bright, painful cyan.

"What in the hells is going on here?" says Gale, staring at the assembled crowd. You can see him searching them for someone muttering, someone gesturing; you already have the sense that none of them are casting magic, though. The tieflings cluster behind Zevlor, keeping their distance.

"We don't know." Zevlor has his hand resting on the hilt of his sword. His expression is grim. "The druids don't either."

"It's the girl! She – she – she *corrupted* the Idol! Tainted it!" Kagma shrieks. Teela coils around her shoulders, hissing threateningly. "We need to execute her!"

"Kagma, calm down!" Rath, at her elbow, pleads. Behind Wyll, Arabella's parents hold each other; the father, Locke, keeping his arm protectively around his wife, Komira, who has angry tears flowing down her face and trembling hands. "Something went wrong with the Rite. Killing the child might make things worse!"

You look around. Karlach is hacking back the vines with her axe, trying to cut the girl free, but the plants are growing faster than she can slash. Zevlor has half an eye on Arabella, half an eye on Kagma. There are harsh murmurs and hushed arguments on both sides of the commotion. You catch eyes with someone your own height and see Nettie, staring at you from behind a pillar.

"If we don't put her down, she'll destroy our entire Sanctum!" screams Kagma. "This is *exactly* what I warned you about!"

"You lay a hand on my daughter and I'll *rip you open*!" Locke holds back his wife as she tries to lunge for Kagma.

It's a thick crowd, but mostly of tallfolk much bigger than you. you lose sight of the action as you weave your way through, pressing towards Nettie.

"What happened to the Idol? When did this start?" Gale demands.

"J-just now. She was normal this morning! Healthy! The same as always!" Tears well up in Locke's eyes. "You can't let them kill her. You can't! She's just a child!"

"Nettie!" you call. She looks up, alarm flashing in her eyes. You repeat Auntie Ethel's parting words: "The rats know the truth about Kagha!"

Nettie stares at you, confused. "What? There aren't any rats," she says, "The viper eats them all!"

Karlach manages to fight her way to Arabella. Vines grab and ensnare her and begin to sizzle and burn, and her legs are almost entirely swallowed up by the time she reaches the girl. She touches Arabella's arm, and Arabella screams; the druids move as one, every spellcaster among them instinctively pushing back against the wave of necromancy that emanates from the circle. The vines snatch Karlach and practically fling her away from Arabella, leaving painful grey marks where they touch.

Nettie must sense the urgency in your words, because she touches her fingers to her temple and murmurs something in Druidic, magic dancing at her fingertips. "Rats... rats..." she mutters, glancing around the clearing with a frown. She looks over at the inner sanctum doors and points: "There!"

Creeping in the grass are three fat grey rats, skittering along the edge of the crowd in single file, with unnatural co-ordination. You don't quite know what to do, but Nettie does. she claps her palms together and magic soaks through her form, melting her down. She dissolves, reforms, and solidifies in the form of a striped cat, faster than you can even blink.

The cat shoots off like a throwing-knife, and, as cats so often do, it pounces, and seizes the largest rat in its paws.

The other two rats repeat Nettie's trick; they dissolve and reform, whip-fast, into two darkly-clad, heavily tattooed people. If it wasn't obvious from the ebb of the Weave that they were Shadow-Druids, their clothes would leave no doubt. They're dressed in stained furs and draped in decorative bones, black ink covering their faces and arms in slashes. As your Da would say, never trust anyone who's wearing a skull on their shoulder.

Nettie-the-cat looks up, ears low, and hisses. The rat under her paws remains still.

"Olodan," says one of the Shadow-Druids, "What should we do to them?"

Nettie attempts to bite her captive only for the rat to dissolve before she gets the chance. The reforming druid is faster than Nettie, and solidifies into a grey-haired Shadow-Druid with a large gnarled wooden staff, which she brings cracking down on top of the Nettie-cat. The grey-haired druid – Olodan – lifts her bare foot and stomps down just as the cat dissolves and Nettie-the-halfing reforms prone on the ground, staff pressed against her neck, Olodan's foot coming down on her chest and pushing the breath out of her.

"Leave them," says Olodan. "Get the girl."

There are cries of alarm among the crowd as people start to notice the Shadow-Druids and Nettie. Nettie attempts to cry out, and Olodan brings her staff down, crunching the back of Nettie's skull against the dirt with a sickening sound.

Several things happen all at once.

Olodan waves a hand at Arabella, and the girl falls limps, unconscious. As soon as she does, the vines begin to wither, rapidly shrinking down to shrivelled black remains. One of the Shadow-Druids lunges for Arabella. The other is intercepted by Wyll, who comes darting forward with his rapier. Olodan raises her staff and barks a word in Druidic; tendrils of black magic snake from her hands and into her staff, giving it a dark, ominous glow.

"Kagha," says Olodan, eyes dark, "Stand with us, or stand aside."

"What's she talking about? Kagha?" Rath's voice is tight with emotion. "Who are these druids? Who allowed them into the enclave?"

"Shadow-Druids," says one of the other druids, staring with wide eyes as Wyll and his opponent trade blows. "They're Shadow-Druids! Kagha betrayed us!"

You look at Kagha and see her backing away from Rath, her eyes flitting between Olodan and the other druids. Her eyes are wide, her pupils shrunk to pinpricks. Terror radiates from her, fills the air with a screeching fearful melody. Her lips are drawn into a cold, angry snarl, her hands balled into fists, like she's about to hit someone.

...That's what scared people do, don't they? They lash out.

Especially scared people whose grip on their authority is slipping – slipping enough to post guards at the inner sanctum on one day but not the next, or enough for their subordinates to start paying off adventurers to depose them, for example.

"You said you would protect us," says Kagha. "You said the Rite of Thorns would keep us safe!"

"Deal's changed." Olodan spits. "We're taking the girl – let the Grove burn when the Absolute comes."

Wyll's opponent throws a hand in the air, about to cast a spell, and Karlach cleaves an arc with her sword that nearly separates the Shadow-Druid's head from their shoulders; with both Wyll and Karlach targeting the same opponent, the two of them mow down the druid in an instant.

The second Shadow-Druid scoops Arabella from the ground, the remains of the Idol of Silvanus nothing more than rubble in a mess of withered vines; when they melt down into another wild-shape, Arabella melts with them.

It's confusing, and a little sickening, to watch. Arabella vanishes in a splatter of magic. The druid reforms into a black, dog-sized spider, leaving behind no trace of their clothes, their weapon, or the little girl in their arms.

Arabella's mother screams, a wordless sound of rage and anguish. The spider leaps easily back to Olodan's side, twitching its fangs.

"Kagha," Olodan commands, "Come."

Kagha is stock-still. She stares at Olodan, saying nothing, and you see Rath preparing to spellcast, and Zevlor creeping up with his sword, watching her with his eyes narrowed. None of them are willing to strike with Arabella – well. However she is.

You hear Wyll shout, "Kagha, *please!*"

Olodan opens her mouth, as though she's about to speak, and instead produces a hoarse, strangled little squeak.

She chokes, her eyes bulging, and stumbles backwards. Her bulging eyes dart towards her left foot. At her ankle is Teela, the viper, pulling her needlelike teeth from Olodan's flesh, leaving behind a snakebite that's already turning a virulent shade of purple.

Olodan collapses to the ground, foaming at the lips.

The spider comes scuttling towards Kagha, but it doesn't get there in time. Karlach pounces on it, roaring. She drives her knee into the carapace of its back, digs her fingers inside, and *rips*. The druid and Arabella fall out of the resulting gore, both of them unconscious, and Karlach grabs the Shadow-Druid by the back of the robes and flings them bodily across the Grove. When they land, a half-dozen watching druids pepper them with thorn-whips and handfuls of blue flame.

Arabella's mother flings herself to the ground and pulls her daughter into her lap, weeping. Zevlor picks up Nettie, her small frame draping from his arms like she's weightless, and his hands glow white with a soft healing light where they make contact with her skin.

"Kagha," says Rath, his voice trembling. "Those were Shadow-Druids. Your Rite was Shadow-magic. You – you *knew* those people."

Kagha's eyes flash. Teela, back on her shoulders, hisses. "They said they could protect us!" cries Kagha. "The Absolute is coming. She's coming for all of us! Halsin knew! Halsin *knew*, and he left us here to die!"

Wyll raises his hands. He's smaller than Kagha and Rath, and surrounded by panicked shouting and arguing on all sides. He raises his voice to cut through them, burning, commanding, and says, "Quiet! Everyone! If I could have your attention, please!"

And, shockingly, it works. The assembled crowd falls silent. Kagha and Rath both turn to look at him.

You don't expect Wyll's next words. His hatred of Kagha had previously radiated from him like an aura. But he says, "Kagha killed that Shadow-Druid! She saved Arabella's life! She's not your enemy. She's proven herself your ally. Put your weapons aside, all of you, and resolve this *calmly* and *peacefully*."

It's like magic. Locke stumbles towards Kagha and grasps her wrists and says, his voice tearful and thick with emotion, "Thank you for saving my daughter." The tension breaks. several of the tieflings peel away, satisfied by the lack of looming violence. Some of the druids cluster around Nettie, and others around Arabella, murmuring healing-words and prayers to nature.

Rath deflates entirely. His shoulders sag. Kagha doesn't seem to know what to do with herself. Locke squeezes her hands before returning his attention to his wife and child, and Kagha looks rather like she's frozen in place.

"I should have known," says Rath. "I should have seen the signs. The changes in your magic, the strange scrolls you've been reading..."

"They – they tricked me," says Kagha. "They were going to leave this place to burn. I was a fool."

"You were afraid." Wyll is as cool and charming as ever. His palms are open, placating. "They took advantage of that fear. They promised you a solution that would keep you safe, and reasons to justify using it."

Kagha hangs her head. "It's true," she says. "Rath..."

Rath studies Kagha, his brow furrowed. He says, calmly, "Thank you, adventurers. Archdruid Kagha and I will look after things from here."

Kagha sighs with obvious relief, and lets Rath lead her towards the Inner Sanctum.

You look for Gale and find him kneeling next to Arabella, who seems to be blinking awake in her mother's lap. Komira pulls her daughter to her chest, tears of joy streaming down her face. Arabella hides her face in Komira's shirt.

"Not even a trace of magic left," remarks Gale, when you join him. "In the Idol of Silvanus *or* little Arabella. No spellcraft involved, and certainly nothing like druidcraft. Did you feel it?"

"Feel what?" you ask.

"No, I suppose you didn't," he murmurs, as though this confirms something, and explains himself no further. He strokes his beard thoughtfully, watching as one of the druids waves a glowing blue hand over Arabella, chanting, and apparently finding nothing unusual either.

Zevlor sets down a now-recovered Nettie. he raises his voice and calls, "Give the family some space, please! Move along, people!"

"I suppose our work here is done," says Gale, frowning. "I wonder why, of all things, it was *this* that our skeletal acquaintance came to warn us about?"

"It's a good thing he did," you say. "We were nearly too late."

"Indeed," says Gale. "Hopefully, that's a sign he *isn't* some sort of evil minion, but one can never be sure when it comes to talking skeletons. Come on, we'd better find Wyll and Karlach before they can get into any more trouble. We've got a lot of walking to do."

You find Shadowheart, Astarion, and Lae'zel waiting for you at the clearing entrance.

"What happened?" asks Shadowheart.

You say, "Wyll told everyone to stop fighting, and they agreed."

Shadowheart snorts. "Typical," she says.

With that, you set off from the grove, and begin the long trek towards the goblin encampment.

Chapter 10

According to Gale's map, you're walking south, cutting through the wilderness surrounding the druids and towards a bridge that leads to the blighted village. You can only assume you're being led in the correct direction; your mother always seemed to know, presciently, where she was going, and you never questioned it. Lae'zel leads you with unflinching confidence, which hopefully means you're going the correct way.

It's hot. The lush plant life surrounding the enclave becomes less lush the further you get from the druids. The ground is dry, rocky, with tufts of weavemoss and daggerroot growing in the shade of the boulders and cliffs; the olive and almond trees grow wild, nestled in long, dry grasses.

"There's traces of settlement here. Old walls and ruins. I wonder who lived here? Or, to be specific, I wonder what happened to them?" says Gale.

Some people default to silence when they're walking. Gale is not one of those people. He talks incessantly while you hike. If nobody responds to him, he will simply begin addressing the air in general, as though he were teaching an invisible class.

Shadowheart shrugs. "Their village had a Thayan necromancer and a chasm to the underdark in it," she says. "According to the gnome we met yesterday, anyway."

Gale says, "We *could* stop and have a look around..."

"No distractions!" Lae'zel barks over her shoulder at him. "We are not stopping to *sightsee* in a Thayan basement!"

Gale looks so crestfallen at this that you say, "Maybe we can stop by the Thayan basement on the way back?", which earns you a glare from Lae'zel.

The sun bakes. Lae'zel barely breaks a sweat; she's thin-limbed and bony, like all her people, but she must have some serious muscle packed away under there. Karlach's engine complains in the heat, chugging and occasionally coughing smoke as she walks, but she herself strides effortlessly, leaving charred black footprints behind whenever she stands still for too long. You lag behind them, panting, making your short-legged strides as long and fast as possible yet always struggling to keep pace. This, too, is how you remember school.

Signs of conflict litter the road, but no people. Discarded goblin-traps, some for hunting and some seemingly just for malice; overturned carts, picked clean of any useful supplies, sometimes with splatters of blood or burned with spellfire. No bodies, not even wildlife. all eaten by gnolls, every last scrap.

When Lae'zel pauses to consult her map, you rest your hand against a ruined wall and pant, sweat pouring down your face.

"You alright, soldier?" says Karlach, leaning against the wall with you. Her chest gives a sharp *clunk* as she shifts her weight.

Karlach spent *ten years* in hell as an indentured servant of an archdevil. Surely you can walk on some hills for a couple of hours. "Fine," you wheeze.

Nonetheless, Jerryl's lute-case weighs heavily on your back. No amount of conviction can take away twenty years of soft living off of the Unrolling Scroll's refectory.

Arabella and the druids knocked a chunk off your travelling time. The sun is high overhead by the time you reach the abandoned village. Lae'zel makes a point of skirting it around the edges. You stop and rest in the shade of the border wall, eating rolls of stale rye bread and passing around the grand total of three waterskins you possess between you.

"I wonder what happened to Scratch?" says Karlach.

"The dog?" you say. "Well, if he died, the gnolls will have eaten him all."

She sighs. "Grim," she says. "I'm choosing to believe he went off and lived a happy life somewhere. Maybe we'll find him?"

"What I wouldn't mind finding is a bloody *horse* or two," Astarion complains. "We've been walking for hours. Where *is* the place?"

Gale consults his map, then the sky, squinting. You are vindicated by the fact that both he and Astarion are obviously exhausted. "If we keep up this pace, then by my estimation..." Gale murmurs, brushing his hair out of his eyes. "...We should just about make it there before dark."

"Ugh."

No goblins accost you as you pass. The path is eerily quiet.

The most dangerous thing you see on the way are hyenas, lying on their sides and panting in the sun, spread in the middle of the road with large, swollen bellies. Their pregnant, misshapen stomachs rise and fall as they breathe. They don't appear to look up as you approach.

"Incubating gnolls," murmurs Wyll. "We should put them down."

"We don't have time," says Shadowheart. "The roads are nearly abandoned anyway. Let's leave them for now."

"And sneak around them?" you ask. "They're blocking the road."

"We'll keep our distance. Besides, it's not really a road."

It's not. It's more of a suggestion than an actual surface used for any kind of meaningful travel anymore. "Lead the way," says Wyll.

You pick your way across the landscape. You're climbing higher and higher, and the Chionthar gets ever further away, the dry red cliffs growing steeper. Your knees complain, vengefully rebelling against you after years of neglect. You resent the detour a little until you glance over your shoulder and watch, at a distance, as one of the hyenas begins to convulse. you look away as the gnoll emerges out of it, but you hear the haunting, cackling noise of the gnoll ripping apart its hyena mother. You're safe, hundreds of yards up the hillside, but you shudder anyway.

"That was close," mutters Shadowheart.

"It's leaving," says Wyll. "Not this way. On the hunt, I suppose."

"That might explain how quiet it is," says Gale. "No goblins in sight. I suppose the gnolls have them wary."

"Perhaps they'll both wipe each other out," suggests Wyll.

Shadowheart shrugs. "With our luck," she says, "I think it's more likely they'll start working together, if they're not already." Nobody has a counter-argument to that.

Your conviction not to ask anyone to slow down breaks, and you spend five minutes gasping against a tree, desperately trying to remember what being cold felt like. Lae'zel paces impatiently as she waits.

Astarion says, "Gods, I haven't walked this much in a day since... I don't remember. Years." That could mean anything. Astarion is the kind of elf who could be anywhere between thirty and three hundred years old.

"I have," says Karlach, "But nowhere this beautiful."

"Everything looks beautiful in the sunlight," says Astarion, "Don't you think?"

It mostly looks like grass and rocks to you. You glance up at Astarion. His pale hair is unkempt, his clothes dusty, but he doesn't look like he's broken a sweat at all. Odd, considering the heat.

Gale says, from a little ways behind you, "Why, Astarion, how uncharacteristically poetic of you!"

Astarion rolls his eyes. "And remind me *which* Waterdhavian poetry contest you *lost*?"

"It was an honourable mention, actually! I'm flattered that you remembered." Gale's annoyance is not very well-hidden by his cheerfulness. He looks hot and bothered, his face flushed. Both Astarion and Gale look worn, their clothes ruffled and unkempt, but you're sure neither of them look as bad as you. Your sweaty hair has been gently unravelling all day, and you are pretty sure you are the colour as well as the approximate softness of a tomato.

There's no sign of any goblins – or *any* civilisation, really – when the sun begins to set. You barely notice how low the sun has gotten until Lae'zel says, impatiently, "Speed up. If we fail to reach the encampment by nightfall..."

Gale looks at the sky. "If it's not in sight by now," he says grimly, "I doubt speeding up will help."

Lae'zel scowls. "If we hadn't taken this cowardly, pointless detour, we would be there already."

"And the gnolls would have just let us stroll right past, would they?" snaps Shadowheart. (Shadowheart looks shockingly good, considering she's been walking all day *and* wearing chain mail. she doesn't have a hair on her braid out of place.)

"Right, well, if we're camping out here, can we do it *now* rather than waiting for the damn sun to set?" says Astarion, putting his hands on his hips. "If I have to take another step, my legs are going to stop bloody working. We weren't *all* raised to be god's perfect killing machine." He adds, to Karlach: "No offence."

"None taken," says Karlach.

Lae'zel rolls her eyes, but she caves. She leads you to a seemingly random secluded spot in the trees, which she declares to be a better campground than all the other random secluded spots in the trees.

When you sit down in the dry grass you feel so leaden and exhausted you doubt you'll ever rise again. You slump until you're lying with your back flat against the ground.

"Was it really that bad?" asks Shadowheart, raising an eyebrow at you.

Easy for her to say. She probably has a Sharran fitness routine back home. "Shush," you say, "Your legs are a lot longer than mine."

The day ends there, in a quiet hillside spot overlooking dry, gnoll-infested woodland. You hear the others begin to discuss hunting game and sleeping in shifts. To your embarrassment, and also to your enormous relief, nobody asks you to contribute a thing.

It takes until sundown proper for Wyll and Astarion to shoot a couple of ducks. The act of hunting together seems to have only driven them further apart.

"I'm still not sure about the meat here," mutters Wyll, pulling feathers off the bird. "There was something wrong with that boar we saw, I'm certain of it."

"Oh, who cares about one boar you caught a glimpse of? They've got meat and they're the right colour, I'm sure they won't kill us." Astarion and Wyll seem to have already had this argument several times on the way here.

"If you've got any better suggestions for what to eat, now is the time to share them," says Gale.

"I saw some wild brassicas," Wyll says. "We could probably forage something."

Gale scoffs. "And have, for dinner, a handful of plain vegetables? Not until starvation is imminent, thank you. I'll take my chances with the ducks."

"What's wrong with plain vegetables?" says Wyll, but Gale simply shakes his head and repeats the question to himself with a note of disbelief, as though plain vegetables had committed an obvious crime.

The darker it gets, the more visible the goblin encampment becomes. At first, it's unclear what you're looking at. There's nothing visible through the trees, just the faint white smoke of fires being lit to hint at settlement beyond the woods. But as darkness spreads, pinpricks of light fade into view, not just campfires but the steady glow of lamps and brazier being lit. It's closer than any of you expected. you *could* probably have made it, if you'd really hurried. You're grateful that Lae'zel says nothing about it. You stare at the lights in wary silence as night falls. (The ducks taste fine, considering they were cooked over a campfire and there's nothing else to eat.)

"I can keep watch for the first four hours or so," says Astarion. "Get some sleep." You're aware distantly that elves don't sleep, but you've never seen one in trance, and you're very curious to catch a glimpse of Astarion when he does it. You don't have tents, but the night is clear and reasonably warm. it's comfortable enough to just lie down in the open.

You expect to sleep soundly, being so tired, but it's not as easy when you're all lying head to toe near the campfire. You drag your bedroll into a corner and drift off quickly, but true sleep is evasive. your fatigue takes on a blunt, painful edge, doing more to keep you awake than lull you to sleep.

Perhaps that's why you wake when it happens.

Everyone else is asleep, but the moonlight is bright enough for you to see by. You feel the rustle of someone leaning over you and a cold hand gently brush your neck, and your eyes snap open.

Astarion is leaning over your neck, lips parted.

The truth is obvious at a glance. With his mouth open, in the moonlight, pale face close to yours, you look at him and suddenly realise with swift and breathtaking clarity that Astarion's teeth are much sharper than they should be. His collar is hanging open, and under his silk white shirt, where his neck meets his collarbone, there are two scarred, long-healed puncture-marks.

You lock eyes with Astarion. He looks just as surprised as you are to be caught in the act of biting your neck.

You stare at each other in mute horror for a moment.

Astarion mumbles, "Shit."

You hold yourself very still. He could lunge for you in an instant, and you might not even get the chance to scream before his teeth sink in. You feel dread in the pit of your stomach, the night silent and dark and inscrutable, and brace yourself.

But it doesn't come. Astarion immediately backs off. He watches you warily as you sit up, and turn to stare at him, neither of you speaking.

The moonlight catches his face in more detail, now. The only sign of age in Astarion's face, snow-white hair aside, are the laugh-lines of his mouth. It's impossible to gauge the age of an elf at a glance, but it's easier to listen to their voice. They speak with the accent and dialect of Common that was contemporary when they learned the language. In Astarion's case, with his posh Upper City aristocrat's accent...

...You remember Laurel the cleaning girl once whispering to you, conspiratorially, that if you hung about the Blushing Mermaid at the right hour of the night you'd see strange people; pale, and beautiful, and effortlessly charming; only you were never to accept their invitations to go home with them, because...

You whisper, "You're a vampire," which feels a little redundant, but you *did* just wake up.

Astarion winces a little at the word. You realise, suddenly, that he's nervous. He's not *jumpy* exactly, he's too well-composed for that, but he's watching you with so much intensity that it can only be fear. Astarion is *waiting* for you to attack him, always. He whispers back, "Not a true vampire. I'm a spawn."

"But..." You flounder, remembering Astarion in the sunlight. Pushing his hair out of his face, squinting, panting. "The sun..."

"It's the tadpole. It – almost cured me. My heart started beating, the sunlight stopped burning." Astarion glances over his shoulder. Everyone is still asleep. "But it didn't cure... everything."

You pause, wracking your brains for knowledge of vampires. your mother had surprisingly little to do with them. A vampire is different from a lich, your mother would say, because they aren't just content to kill; they capture and enslave, surrounding themselves with once-innocent spawn. Vampire spawn are said to be seductive, mindless and evil, motivated by nothing but hunger and lust...

You whisper, "But you ate *duck*," which is not really the most intelligent thought you've ever had.

Astarion gives you a bit of a look, and the dread in your stomach dissipates. There's no way Astarion is mindless; even if you couldn't feel his tadpole, only a man with a measure of free will could make the face he's making at you.

"I can eat," he whispers. "But it hasn't... helped."

You stare at him. "Helped with... what? You're starving?"

"I can't starve. I *couldn't* starve." He corrects himself. "But I... I'm weak. Slow. I just needed a drop. I can feel it holding me back, the... the thirst."

His red eyes are wide, sincere. If he's lying, he's an excellent liar. In which case, you're fucked.

You glance behind him and see that the others are still asleep.

"Are you really a magistrate?" you whisper.

He hesitates. "I was," he says. "About two hundred years ago. Before I was killed, and... turned."

"What about your – " Gods, you wish there was a better word. "Your master?"

A shadow passes over Astarion's face. Your tadpole squirms greedily, as though sensing emotion in him. "He lost his grasp on me," whispers Astarion. "I can disobey him. He has no power over me, for the first time in centuries."

You try to put yourself back in your work shoes. You have been woken up by dozens of nighttime incidents, everything from bedwetting to unexpected wild magic surges. Your job is to calmly behave as though you know exactly what to do in every situation, no matter what. A vampire spawn with an empty stomach is not so different to other problems you have faced. Probably.

You sigh and say, "You weren't going to kill me, were you?"

He shakes his head. "I sincerely swear you were in no danger," he says.

You rub your eyes, uncertain if you're being open-minded or just plain stupid.

"If I let you bite me," you whisper, and his eyes widen. "Will that help?"

He seems uncertain how to respond for a moment, while is unlike him. His hands search for a response, his wrists flexing. "Enormously," he whispers.

"...Will it hurt?"

He shakes his head. "You won't feel a thing," he says softly. "The tiniest pinprick."

Really?! says Noonan, in the back of your mind. A vampire? It's one thing teaching a goblin kid, it's another letting some undead rando put his teeth in your neck! But Noonan is dead, and more importantly, never approved of anything you did anyway.

"Only a little," you say. "I don't want to be anaemic tomorrow."

"Just a drop," he promises. "I don't need much."

Pity wins you over in the end. You hate falling asleep hungry, yourself.

"Alright," you say. "Come on. Before I change my mind."

You expect the process of getting bit by Astarion to feel clinical and awkward. But Astarion places his hands on you – one on your chin, one on your chest – and gently guides you back into a lying position with a soft, delicate touch, something almost but not quite affectionate. His fingers are cool on your skin.

"This is a gift, you know," Astarion murmurs. "I won't forget it."

He tilts your chin upwards with a feather-soft touch, and you squeeze your eyes shut.

It's not quite painless. It's a cold, sharp prick, like a shard of ice to the throat; the ice ebbs into a cold numbness, taking away all sensation in your neck.

The numbness is slow and gentle as it spreads. You hear Astarion swallow once, again. His breathing turns regular. In a way, with your eyes closed, it's a little soothing, if not a little disturbing at the same time. He's drinking your *blood*. You aren't jealous.

You don't realise anything is wrong until Astarion stops swallowing. You can still feel that spine of ice in you, the numbness of his bite, and your unwillingness to see what's happening is outweighed by your sudden weird concern that Astarion is choking on your blood. You can't see his face, just his hair, his face in the crook of your neck. You haven't had anyone this close to you since... whichever failed date was your last, about ten years ago. Astarion's breathing – do vampire spawn breathe, or just him? – has stopped, and you hear him make a small noise, a grunt, and he shudders. Two more rapid swallows.

"...starion?" you slur. You find you can't quite move your lips and tongue right.

You reach up a hand and tap his shoulder. No response. You try to sit up, but he has you pinned by sheer size. He makes another noise, as though struggling to speak. His lips never leave your neck.

The numbness is spreading faster now. There's a weird tingle in your fingertips. You can *feel* the blood leaving you, a little pulse of cold through your veins. your heart speeds up.

You tap Astarion again, but your hand moves feebly and clumsily. You run your hands against the back of his shirt. The feeling is no longer delicate. Astarion grips the ground, hunches over you, stone-still, shuddering and breathing oddly, as though he's struggling not to cough, or –

or –

You try to speak, but it comes out slurred, *aaauunnn*. You try to cry out, but it dies to a weak, faltering whimper. Astarion keeps gulping. You can't see his face. His movements are frantic, animal, uncontrolled.

You attempt to wriggle out from Astarion's deadweight grip. You don't have the strength to move; scrambling, you reach out for the tadpole, a little beacon of clarity and sharpness in your cold fading thoughts. You reach for the closest door in your mind, extend your will out to Astarion, but unlike with Karlach there's a little resistance; you gasp as your visions swims, tadpoles merging. You are lying on your back; you are **hunched** over yourself; you are gulping mouthfuls of something hot and salty and disgusting, and you push harder, screaming inside your mind as though that'll make it louder – *ASTARION – ASTARION* – and when you finally break through and connect your mind with his you're horrified. You were terrified you'd sense murderous intent, but you don't; suddenly you are terribly, sickeningly thirsty, you are **hunched** over Eve, your fingers **clawing** the dirt, your eyes wide and wild and unseeing – *ASTARION! STOP! HELP ME!* – your stomach lurching and your unfamiliar **heart beating** and you **FEEL**

TERROR

LIKE

YOU'VE NEVER FELT BEFORE – YOUR STOMACH RECOILS – YOUR MIND SCREAMS – GODS YOU'VE NEVER FELT THIS HUNGRY IN YOUR LIFE – YOU'RE DISGUSTING – YOU CAN'T WATCH YOUR BACK – YOU CAN'T TURN AWAY – CAZADOR COULD BE BEHIND YOU – CAZADOR IS ALWAYS BEHIND YOU – CAZADOR IS AROUND THE NEXT CORNER AND WAITING IN THE TEMPLE AND LURKING IN THE TEAHOUSE – ASTARION – HELP ME, ASTARION, HELP, HELP,

***HELP, I DON'T KNOW HOW! I DON'T KNOW HOW TO HELP YOU, I DON'T WANT TO
DIE, HELP ME, PLEASE, GODS, HELP ME–***

Your head slams against the ground as Astarion is ripped off you in a sudden, horrible, painful motion. Wyll is not a big man, but he's got enough heavy human bones and muscles to fling Astarion across the campsite with enough force and speed to sever the connection clean. There's a terrible stabbing pain where Astarion's mouth was, burning across your throat and shoulders.

You feel your mind readjust to its normal position, taking a smattering of Astarion's memories. They are dark, and bloody, and terrifying. Your tadpole squirms, satisfied, and abandons you to your pain.

You gasp in a breath and everything swims, nausea overpowering you. For a moment you're too nauseous to breathe, too sick, the numb coldness transforming into a blazing inferno. You taste blood. You're certain that you're bleeding out, that you must be haemorrhaging, but when you manage to catch a glimpse of yourself there's no blood on your neck or chest. You struggle to sit up, but you can't. you tilt your head backwards to look at what's happening.

Wyll is half-dressed, unarmed, and simply tackles Astarion to the ground using his bare hands. Your head spins, and the details turn fuzzy. One blurry figure wrestles another. The dark figure throws a punch at the pale figure. the pale figure catches it and twists, reversing the grip. Distantly, you hear shouting.

There's a light – sunlight? – which makes your head hurt. You feel someone crouch next to you, a hand on your shoulders – a warm, rough touch, nothing like Astarion's. They pull you into their lap. You expect Shadowheart, or maybe Gale, but when your eyes open and the colours sharpen back into shapes, it's Lae'zel. Lae'zel is staring at you, unconcerned, her mouth twisted in the usual disdainful frown.

There's still a lot of shouting and scuffling, faraway in your ears. It occurs to you suddenly that you cannot let Wyll kill Astarion.

"S..." You try to make your lips form the word *stop* and find it suddenly much more difficult than usual. You look at Lae'zel's face, into her eyes. Lae'zel has eyes a soft golden green, her pupils a dark narrow slit. You try to move your arms and, somehow, fail. "St..."

No use. Your mouth is as dry as a lizard's arse. Lae'zel, without shame nor embarrassment, picks you up like a baby. it takes her no effort whatsoever to stand with you in her arms. You're probably no heavier than her greatsword. The pain is easing, and concentrating is getting easier.

"Stop," you slur. You try to jog Lae'zel's elbow, but you keep missing. "Stop... Stop..."

Unable to point, you flop your leaden hands uselessly in the direction of Astarion and Wyll. That causes you to shift a little, and that little shift causes a nebula of dizzy nausea to wash over you. You have to close your eyes for a moment.

When you open your eyes again, Lae'zel is examining you, expression unchanging. She waits for you to recover. Then she calmly takes in a breath, raises her head, and screams, "*STOP FIGHTING!*" in a way that perfectly cuts through all of the rabble.

The noise hurts, but not too badly. The longer you're awake, the better you feel. The burning, tingling sensation spreads through your body, granting you back the ability to see what's going on more clearly. Astarion and Wyll are both separated now. They stare at each other warily. Astarion has a little dribble of blood at his lips. You have no idea if it's his or yours. Wyll has his back to you, but the murder is obvious in his body language.

Astarion doesn't look at you. His eyes are on Wyll. He looks wary and calm, but if your glimpse into his mind was anything to go by, his thoughts are probably completely occupied by the danger that Wyll presents.

"Let her explain," says Lae'zel stiffly.

"What's to explain?" Wyll's voice is tight and furious. "This man is a monster."

"Then you should have no difficulty listening." Lae'zel sneers. You're blessedly relieved. Lae'zel seems to have things under complete control. She radiates calm, in a sort of bloodthirsty, violent, githyanki way.

Lae'zel sets you back on your feet, then props you up when you lose your balance. You're starting to get your bearings back. Shadowheart is somewhere behind you. someone has conjured an orb of light to see by. Karlach is standing well back from the fighting, but her face is grim, and her engine is running loudly enough for you to hear.

You say, still slurring, "It was an accident."

"I don't mean to state the obvious," says Shadowheart, from somewhere behind you, "But he *bit* you. That can't possibly have been accidental."

Wyll glances back at you, but doesn't turn his back on Astarion.

You say, "I told him to do it," which is what the kids at work often say when another child has just done something especially disgusting. Actually, this isn't the first time an elf has bitten you. it's just the first time the elf in question has gone through puberty first.

Shadowheart repeats, "You *told him to do it*," in a tone of voice that could wither the entire Cloakwood.

Wyll, lacking his sword, points a finger at Astarion. He's a warlock, you remember; he's always armed as long as his lips and hands are free. He growls, "Explain yourself."

Astarion sighs. Wyll still looks and sounds incredibly pissed, but apparently Astarion is just relieved to be given a chance to speak. "Before the Nautiloid, I was a vampire spawn," says Astarion. "Enslaved. I'm not anymore. The mind flayer tadpole gave me back my freedom."

"A fine story," says Wyll coldly. "Why should we believe you?"

"Why should – ?!" Astarion splutters. "The *tadpole*, *idiot*! What is *wrong* with you people?!"

"And you fancied a little midnight snack, did you?" snaps Shadowheart.

Astarion winces. "I only drink the blood of animals! *Usually*. But after what happened with Gale, when I was too weak to... Well... I was scared of what might happen if I didn't feed properly. What might happen to *all* of us."

He sounds uncharacteristically earnest. Actually, now that you think about it, you're certain he is just faking. Damn the man! His performance is impeccable. If there's one thing you got from reading his mind, it was the distinct impression that he has himself buried in lies.

Wyll glances between you and Astarion. "Why didn't you tell us?" he presses, but you can tell that Astarion's act is softening him up.

"I was afraid, for reasons you may be able to imagine, that an overzealous monster hunter might try to stake me in the heart." Astarion's voice takes on a bitter edge. "This is my chance to be *cured*. To live again. I didn't care to risk it. Now, can everyone calm down and put the weapons away?"

You glance behind yourself and see both Shadowheart and Gale are armed. Gale moves his staff from a casting position to the crook of his elbow. Shadowheart scoffs and puts aside her mace. They have presumably been threatening Astarion from behind you. It's almost touching.

Wyll sighs. His body language eases. "And what have you done to Eve?" he says. "She's as white as a ghost."

Astarion doesn't look at you. He looks just about everywhere but you, in fact. He makes too much of a show of making it look casual. You're starting to pick up on the trick now. Astarion over-acts; the more open he seems, the more likely he's lying. He's covering the fact he is either too ashamed or too embarrassed to look directly at you, which you choose to take as a compliment.

"She – very kindly – volunteered to help." Astarion says this far, far too warmly. Ah, that brings you some satisfaction. He's afraid of what you're about to say. You know Astarion lost control of

his hunger, and so does he. You know he lied to you in order to convince you. You could out him as a danger to everyone, right now...

...But now your head contains a handful of dark, terrible memories that aren't yours. Disgust, self-loathing; terror so deep it numbs your bones; these are the things roiling under the mind of the pretty-faced pale elf.

You say, "It's true. I'm fine."

It's almost true. The feeling has returned to your fingers and toes, and you're almost standing straight. Wyll frowns at you, expression softening.

You add, "Astarion is just a bit of a glutton."

Astarion makes a small, startled noise in his throat, which he plays off as a scoff of indignation. "I – excuse me! You're *extremely small*! I didn't realise how little blood you contained!"

"Yuck!" says Karlach, throws back her head, and yawns. She's entirely relaxed now. "You couldn't have picked someone bigger, fangs?"

"I couldn't be sure I could trust any of you!" Astarion protests. (You realise Astarion picked you purely because you are the heaviest sleeper. Damn him. Damn your soft heart.)

"Is this going to be a problem going forward?" says Gale. "Are you going to need... regular feeding?"

"Yuuuuck," repeats Karlach. "I mean, no offence, Astarion, it's just gross to think about. Your shits must be awful."

"*Karlach!*" Shadowheart squeals. She can't keep the laughter out of her voice.

Astarion raises his hands. "It should be fine," he says, bravely ignoring Karlach. "Now that everything is, ah, out in the open, I can find other means. For example, if we get into a fight on the road with any criminals or ne'er-do-wells..."

"I see. Predation." Gale sounds dry, but doesn't object. "I suppose if we're going to hurt people, there's not much difference between a stab from a sword or a bite from a vampire's fangs, is there?"

Wyll rubs his shoulder. You wonder how much the two of them managed to hit each other before Lae'zel interrupted. "Alright," he says, but he's still pretty cold – apparently the Blade of Frontiers has *some* prejudices. "I believe you, Astarion... For now. But next time you bite one of us without warning..."

"Yes, yes, threat noted, thank you, goodnight," Astarion mutters, waving a hand. "Now that everyone's awake, I think it's just about time to change over the night watch. Eve, darling, you're exempt—"

"You know, nothing makes me sleep more soundly than knowing we have a vampire spawn in our midst," says Shadowheart dryly.

"I'll take the next watch." Wyll cuts in. "There's still a few hours before dawn. Get some rest."

He seems quite calm now. But you notice him picking up and strapping on his rapier, all the same, as Lae'zel guides you to your bedroll.

You carefully update your mental profile of Astarion. Almost three hundred years old; former magistrate; escaped vampire spawn. His memories are dark and shadowy and terrifying, and they give you the itch to glance over your shoulder. Likes: drinking your blood. Dislikes: the truth.

Noonan would write an incredible song about this, you think to yourself. It's a good thing he's not here.

This time when you fall asleep, to your relief, you don't dream at all.

The next morning, the puncture-holes in your neck have vanished, healed over entirely. The whole thing might have been a bizarre dream, except Astarion's vampirism has inspired Gale and he's cooking blood sausage over a fire. His pan is rich with the smell of cooking pork fat and pennyroyal.

"Now, imagine," muses Gale, "If I were to make this recipe with *human* blood rather than that of a boar. Assuming it were made without garlic, could a vampire lord subsist entirely on sausage meat?"

"I don't know," you sigh.

"Which begs the question: if vampires could consume blood in *any* form, why bother to bite? It seems rather messy. Conspicuous, too. How much smoother last night might have been if, instead of drinking directly from your bloodstream, Astarion had simply decanted a small amount of your blood into a bottle and drank that?"

"I don't know," you sigh again.

You still don't feel entirely right after last night. Your limbs feel sluggish and achy. Your indifference doesn't bother Gale.

"I suppose it's a question of physiology," says Gale. "How did it feel?"

"What?"

"Astarion drinking your blood. How did it feel?"

"Ask him to bite you and find out for yourself," you grumble. It's far too early for this conversation.

Gale hums to himself as he cooks. He fries up the last of your potatoes and onions with chunks of black pudding ("Not the correct name," he tells you, "But it's common parlance. A black pudding is actually a monster.") Despite the unsavoury ingredients, the resulting skillet from Gale's pan is remarkably appetising.

"Make sure you eat," Gale urges you, "You'll need to build back up the strength you lost by feeding Astarion."

"Can you not put it like that? You make it sound like I'm some kind of vampire wet nurse."

Astarion, to his credit, hesitates when he sees you sitting there. You raise your eyebrow at him.

"Good morning, Astarion," you say. "I was just speaking with Gale, about how it felt to be bitten by a vampire while in no danger whatsoever of being murdered in my sleep. It was very interesting."

Astarion clears his throat. "I do have to admit I might have been a *tiny* bit... inaccurate... last night."

"As the orc man once said to the gnome maiden."

"Well!" says Astarion brightly. "I'm glad *someone* has a sense of humour about this whole affair."

Only when Shadowheart and Gale are distracted in conversation and everyone else is elsewhere does Astarion lean into you and mutter:

"If you tell *anyone* about—"

"Cazador?" you say, just to make Astarion squirm. You succeed. He flinches, like the name hurts to hear. "I won't."

Astarion scowls. He is not, you notice, eating food this morning. apparently you were enough of a meal to get by. At least *he's* energetic. You're exhausted.

"Your former employer," you say, "He seemed like a cunt."

Astarion barks out a laugh. You can immediately tell by his reaction that the joke was inappropriate. Astarion only seems genuine when he laughs, and he laughs more based on how depraved the joke is.

"Anyway, you might as well finish the threat you started," you say. "What will happen if I tell anyone about your former employer, the Cunt of Barovia?"

He wheezes. He slaps his knee. For a man who hasn't needed to breathe for two centuries, he can still guffaw.

"Hah!" Astarion's blood-red eyes gleam with mirth. You now know, thanks to Astarion's tadpole, that all vampires have red eyes. "Well, now threatening you wouldn't be any fun. You know, for what it may be worth, Evening Tavernsong, I *do* prefer you alive rather than dead."

This is as close as you will ever get to an apology from Astarion, you think. You accept it wholeheartedly. You can't take it personally *every* time someone comes narrowly close to killing you, after all. You'd never get anything done.

You and Astarion drop the subject of vampirism when the others slip back into earshot. Despite your fatigue, you're feeling smugly pleased with yourself this morning. Noonan always said you were the worst bard in the family, your father aside. But only a bard of considerable talent could have a bloodlust-crazed vampire almost drain her to death, read his mind, glimpse his thoughts, and still manage to entice him into preferring her alive. You see, Cazador Szarr had no sense of humour whatsoever.

It's easy to spot a goblin encampment long before you actually reach its borders. Goblin tribes tend to create a lot of decorative art. This decorative art mainly consists of bones, shards of metal, and empty glass bottles piled into seemingly random heaps of junk. The purpose of these piles is so that anywhere near the goblins' turf, there is guaranteed to be something sharp, dirty and heavy to hand. These are not just for throwing at intruders and attackers, but also for the goblins to throw at each other during social disputes or inter-clan skirmishes.

When you pass a decorated banner, Wyll stops and waits for everyone to gather around him. Seven adventurers, traipsing towards a goblin camp. In all other circumstances, you'd most likely be a group of itinerant mercenaries, sent to exterminate the goblins like an infestation of vermin in an old brewery cellar.

Wyll crosses his arms.

"Goblin sentries up ahead," he says. "How are we going to do this?"

Astarion, the in-house charlatan, shrugs his elegant shoulders.

"Walk up there and act like we belong there, we know everything, we worship the Absolute, and we're far too important to be kept waiting," says Astarion.

"And if they ask us who we are?" asks Gale. "What's our cover story?"

"Oh, let's just make it up as we go along!" Astarion waves a hand. "It'll be fine. Goblins are half-witted little beasts. Deceiving them should take no effort whatsoever."

Astarion seems very peppy this morning. He's noticeably more energetic, more chatty. This is, presumably, the restorative effect of having drunk a hearty meal of your blood.

"Most goblins are half-witted and easy to deceive," says Gale. "The operative word is *most*. It would be wise not to assume."

You say, trying to contribute, "I had a goblin student once."

"What, really?" says Karlach, frowning. "How did that work? I mean, did they...?"

"She was a good girl," you say, a touch defensively. "She was just the same as the other children her age, once she'd had a week or two to settle in. She did well in the lessons they gave her. By the time she'd been there a year or two she was casting wizard spells."

"What happened to her then?" says Karlach.

"Well – that was as long as she went to the academy," you say. "She said was too old after that. Grown up. They only live to be about forty, you know."

Karlach frowns. "That's sad," she says. "Gods, now I'm gonna feel bad if we have to hurt any goblins."

"Few goblins live to be older than twenty in tribes like these," says Gale, "Which means the wisdom of age is often missing among goblins and their cousins. But, nonetheless, the question remains: we don't know what the Cult of the Absolute is, what they want, and the exact extent of their influence in this entire situation."

"We know what they want," says Shadowheart, "It's the artefact. The one the githyanki are looking for."

"Perfect! We'll say we have important information. What's the important information? The githyanki are looking for the artefact! Look, we've even got one of them as evidence!"

Lae'zel glares at Astarion. "Make a spectacle of me and I will decapitate you," she says.

Astarion snaps his fingers. "Rightio! Here's my advice: follow my lead, and, unless absolutely, *definitely* necessary, keep your pretty little lips *sealed* and let *me* do the talking."

You let Astarion take the lead as you cross the rickety bridge leading to the abandoned Selûnite temple. How bad can he be? He managed to talk you into letting him *bite you*.

The spiked wooden gateway that serves as the camp entrance is blocked by a goblin sentry. The air stinks of rotting meat and slurry. Inside the gateway you see wargs tied to wooden posts, growling and snapping at each other, occasionally giving the odd bark or holler. This must be where the goblins keep their wargs, when they're not raiding. The goblin sentry seems only mildly surprised to see seven adventurers heading towards him.

"Bleeding nora," he says, "Who the hells are you people?"

"We were helping with the search," sniffs Astarion, in full Upper City mode. He does, admittedly, an excellent impersonation of a nobleman. "Speaking of which, we need to be getting inside, so..."

"Eh? I thought you was all killed by owlbears!" The goblin squints. "Where's your necklaces?"

Only when you're close do you notice the brand on the goblin's face. Someone has burned a symbol over the goblin's left eye, one you recognise from the brother and sister who attacked you when they saw Shadowheart's artefact. They had the same icon emblazoned on their silver necklaces. A triangle containing a bloodstained handprint.

"Look, we don't have all day," says Astarion indifferently. "Let us through, *now*."

"Don't order me around, you jumped-up piss-stain." The goblin scowls. "You want to get in, you pay the bridge toll. It's fifty gold a head."

Astarion gives a huff of indignance. "Very funny. Now *move*."

"Don't threaten me, sunshine. We're all supposed to be under the banner of the Absolute, ain't we? Peace an' love for all who serve the True Souls. Now cough up, it's fifty gold each."

The goblin examines Astarion, wrinkling his hooked nose. The goblin has sharp, carnivorous teeth and a vindictive expression. Any urge to ask *What's a True Soul?* is decidedly eliminated by that face. Astarion sighs, feigning exasperation.

"We're not going to *pay* you. Don't be ridiculous. Now step aside," Astarion growls, "We have vital information about the druid, Halsin."

That's the magic word. The belligerent smile on the goblin's face is wiped away. He frowns, suddenly interested in what you have to say. "What about him?" the goblin demands.

"None of your gods-damned business! This information is for your superiors, not you!" Astarion snaps.

You make eye contact with Shadowheart. She gives you a look that says, *Why did we let this idiot do the talking?*

"Where is he? Where did you see him?!" demands the goblin.

Astarion opens his mouth as though to dismiss these questions out of hand, but freezes before he can utter a word.

"What do you mean, where is he? Halsin was supposed to be imprisoned here!" Astarion splutters.

"Where have you been, mate? The True Souls have been tearing our arseholes out all day over it!" The goblin spits. "The druid bloody escaped!"

Astarion is lost for words. Some of the wargs have noticed you, and are pulling on their leashes, barking and howling. Distantly you can hear cheering, and a drum being banged; a large social gathering of goblins, just nearby. Within moments, everyone will know you're here.

Astarion screeches, "What do you mean, the druid *escaped*?!"

"He was a bliddy archdruid, wasn't he!" The sentry retorts. "The guard watching him turned her back to thump one of the kiddies and he turned into a mouse and bugged off!"

"So where the hells is he?!"

"That's what I thought you was going to tell us!" The goblin scowls. "Here, why didn't anyone tell me you was coming? How do I know you're really one of us?"

Before Astarion can respond the goblin closes one of his eyes. When his eyes are shut, the symbol burned into the flesh is completely visible, including the lines burned onto his eyelid. When the symbol is completely formed, it glows for a moment, a small burning sigil of magic that leaves a searing shape in your vision. Your tadpole wriggles excitedly in response to it. It makes you feel distinctly *Illithid*, fills you with a smug, Mind Flayer sense of power.

As the symbol glows, power courses through you. *Authority*.

The goblin is beneath you. You know, instinctively, that he has branded himself your slave. You focus the tadpole's writhing, squirming concentration into the symbol. You push on the connection between your brain and the goblin's like a battering ram.

"*We belong here*," you say.

It passes through the goblin's skull like a wave of ecstasy. The tadpole squirms with contentment, sated. Every time you do it, it gets easier...

The goblin bends low. He's... bowing? Attempting to curtsy? Either way, he hunches to the ground and inclines his head with terrified respect.

"True Soul!" he stammers. "Er... Begging your pardon. I have to give all visitors a hard time, it's my orders. I'll escort you inside, right away, your, er... Your True Souliness."

Whatever you did, it definitely worked. The goblin *is* treating you like you belong here now. The only problem is that it's working *entirely too well*.

"Now, hold on," Astarion stammers, "If the druid isn't here then we should be—"

"Who's there?" shouts a different goblin, from among the wargs.

"True Souls!" shouts back the sentry. "They have information for Minthara!"

Astarion looks back at you. He raises his eyebrows fractionally. Within that singular movement he somehow manages to fit a large amount of panic.

"Well stop wasting their time and send them in!" hollers the warg handler. "Everyone inside reports to Minthara. She's pissed off as a drunk wasp!"

"Aw, hells," says the sentry, "Come on, if she gets angry cause you're late we're all mincemeat. Er – right this way, True Souls."

Approaching the bridge behind you is a squad of goblins, sandwiching you between the encampment entrance and your only escape route. Astarion looks over his shoulders, down at the river. No exits.

"Onward," says Lae'zel simply. To her mind, you realise, this is all according to plan. After all, for all she knows, the True Souls might have her people's stolen artefact.

They could also have answers about your predicament, if you survive to get them. So long as you keep up the ruse. But you've got a psionic tadpole parasite in your head. How hard can that be?

Chapter 11

Your new goblin escorts are called Olak and Rindle, and, thankfully, they're both friendly now that they think you're True Souls. The walk from the bridge to the temple complex is short, and you spend it carefully milking as much information from them as possible.

"You on your way to Moonrise with the rest?" says Rindle cheerfully. "Next caravan's in a few days. Lucky bastards."

"There's only three True Souls left at the camp, the others all left with the last one," says Olak. "They says we get to go as well someday, if we do good enough. You'll put in a good word for me, yeah?"

"Don't mention *him*, he's the one who charged you the bloody toll – tell them I helped you out," says Rindle.

Halsin was imprisoned by the goblins for a grand total of four hours. They had assumed, being not very bright, that his being a bear was a permanent condition.

"Who's still at the camp?" asks Wyll.

"Oh, you know, just the bosses, Priestess Gut and Dror Ragzlin. And Minthara, of course." Rindle gives a little shudder. "I'd never forget her."

Priestess Gut is a goblin name, and Dror Ragzlin sounds like one too. Minthara definitely isn't, but judging by the amount of fear and deference the goblins show when they talk about her, she's got the goblins under her thumb pretty effectively.

"What happens to the goblins that go to Moonrise?" says Shadowheart.

"Oh – err – well, it's *Moonrise*, innit?" says Rindle. "You get to be close to the Absolute. If you're lucky, you even get to talk to her."

"It's not if you're lucky, it's if you're *good*," says Olak. "Good enough to get rewarded and turned into a True Soul. You've done it, haven't you? What's it like?"

Well, you think, first a giant tentacle in the sky knocks down your workplace, then teleports you into a wet pod, and a mind flayer comes and sticks a maggot in your eyeball.

"Perform well enough at your duties and you can have the honour of discovering it for yourself," mutters Astarion.

"Have many of the goblins have gone to Moonrise?" asks Gale.

"Only a few of 'em what got sent with Minthara last time she reported back. Haven't seen them again. They're probably living it up over there," says Olak bitterly. "Hearing the Absolute's voice every day... Serving her..."

Shadowheart says, "I thought all goblins worshipped Maglubiyet," which would make you openly cringe if you could; it's far too conspicuous a statement. Luckily, the goblins don't seem to find anything amiss. They seem to assume this is some kind of test.

"No, True Soul, we're done with Maglubeyet," promises Olak, "We're believers in the Absolute now. The one and only."

"I'm gonna become a True Soul as well," Rindle declares, "One of the best – one of her Chosen!"

"A Chosen of the Absolute," Gale repeats. It's a statement, not a question, but you can see the curiosity in his face, even if he's trying to hide it.

"What kind of god would make a *goblin* their Chosen?" mutters Astarion.

"The Absolute takes in all sorts," protests Olak. "She loves all her followers. Even goblins! She said so."

Behind their backs, Astarion rolls his eyes. You silently wonder how long the ruse will keep. What are these people *saying*? If one of the Chosen *had* been a goblin, Astarion would have just blown your entire cover. They're asking questions about a location you're all supposed to have *come from*.

"If you go to Moonrise, you might even get to meet one of them," says Rindle, in a tone of soft reverence. "Priestess Gut told me she met one of them."

"Loads of True Souls at Moonrise as well," adds Olak. "Nice ones, too, who say please and thank you, and don't kick you or nothing."

"I wish Minthara was like that," says Rindle gloomily.

"I like you," Olak tells you, "You're like what if a human was goblin-sized. And you've got nice tits."

"Don't be dirty," you say, absently.

"Sorry," he mutters.

"Sorry, *True Soul*," you add, for the sake of instilling him with more manners.

"Sorry, True Soul."

You pass through the warg-pens and pass through an area of cleared forest, bordered by barricades of freshly-cut wood. To your surprise, there's a pair of rothé being kept in a stable that was clearly cobbled together very recently. Not goblin-made.

The temple looms overhead, its crumbling watchtowers decorated with goblin-totems and graffiti. The closer you get, the louder the sounds get. Raised voices; deep, thrumming drumbeats, disparate instruments and singing, laughter.

"The lads are having a do," says Rindle, slightly apologetically. "Celebrating, like. The last boys from the raid got back last night."

"It was a big one," says Olak, "I was one of the scouts. Waukeen's Rest, big huge fancy inn up the hill. I hear they even kidnapped a Duke."

"Do you know which one?" asks Wyll.

"Eh, I dunno," shrugs Olak, "Humans all look the same to me." Then he turns from Wyll, towards Gale, and adds, "Not you, of course, True Soul."

You see Wyll's mouth open, about to speak the words *I'm human too*; then he seems to remember the horns on his head, and the glowing red-and-black eye, and closes it again.

"We can take it from here," you tell the goblins, as you approach the drawbridge leading into the temple's main courtyard. The goblins nod eagerly. They seem to think that your conversation went very well – luckily for all of you.

This Selûnite temple was obviously very impressive, once upon a time. Statues of the Moon Maiden stand on stone plinths, most of them falling apart. The years have taken a toll on the place; most of the east section of the temple has collapsed entirely into rubble, and what's left has been heavily modified. Rickety wooden scaffolding holds up tent-flaps of rotting leather and furs, sheltering trebuchets and wagons. Varnished wood, with steel attachments. Not at all the goblin style.

"Someone has been supplying these goblins with garrison-made weapons and vehicles," says Wyll, "No wonder the refugees were forced into hiding. Look at all of this."

"If the cult of the Absolute paid for all this just to kit out some goblins," says Karlach, "Then they have their hands on some *serious* money."

You stare through the archway, examining the crowd of assorted partygoers. Goblins, dozens of them; bugbears, too, because wherever there are goblins there are usually also bugbears. But here and there, dotted in with the crowd, are non-goblins. You see humans, a drow, an elf.

"Look," you say, "Other visitors."

"Which means we blend in," says Astarion. "At least there's that."

"Yes, at least there's that," mutters Shadowheart darkly. "Remind me never to consent to any plan that goes, *Just let Astarion do the talking*. How the hells are we going to get out of here?"

"Easy," says Wyll. "We'll just walk away before they realise we're not really Absolutists."

Shadowheart scoffs. Her braid dances. "Oh, wonderful. I should have thought of it myself. I mean, what the hells are we going to *say*? They don't have Halsin, and now they think we're joining their next caravan!"

"We must search this camp for any information about my people's relic," Lae'zel declares. "We cannot turn back."

Shadowheart bristles. "They – probably don't know anything," she says. "They're goblins. *Primitives*."

"Your mind is also rather primitive," Lae'zel sneers, "It produces nothing but drivel. If the goblins frighten you, by all means, turn around and return to the Grove! I grow tired of your cowardice."

"My cowardice? Are you talking about my *common sense*?" says Shadowheart. "There's nothing here for us. It's obvious."

"Only one way to find out," says Karlarch, and shrugs her large shoulders.

If only that were true, you think.

Gale frowns. "If we can find the relic, the githyanki will cure us," he says. "If we can find out what's happening behind the Cult of the Absolute, we can find out *why* we were infected in the first place. Our tadpoles aren't normal, that much we know. And if the goblins give us a clue as to where Halsin's gone, all the better."

You have a strong suspicion none of those things will be happening, but you say nothing.

"Gale is right. We need to get to the bottom of this Absolute mystery," says Wyll. "We won't learn anything hiding in the Grove, hoping Halsin comes home."

"Alright," says Gale, and claps his hands. "Let's pop in, learn as much as we can, and make a swift egress before anyone notices anything. If the goblins think our tadpoles make us in some way holy, all the better. Does anyone have any objections?"

Shadowheart chews her lip, but says nothing.

You glance over to the crowd of goblins in the courtyard.

"Well, look sharp," says Astarion brightly. "This *is* a celebration."

"You seem cheerful," you say.

He beams at you. "Believe me," he says, "I'm not. I didn't survive this far to lose my life trying to blend in at a goblin camp. If the druid's not here, what the fuck are we doing?"

"What should we do if we *are* caught?" says Shadowheart.

"Scream," Astarion suggests. "We'll probably hear it. Shall we go and mingle? Believe it or not, I've actually attended worse parties than this."

"Coming from you," you say, "That doesn't encourage me."

There are at least a hundred goblins living here, and this much can be said; they know how to party. You seem to have arrived in the middle of a celebration. There's no band, but there are a handful of goblin musicians, none of them co-ordinating; an impressive drumbeat mingles with at least two flutes playing different songs. Karlach is getting compliments all over the place. Being a huge, scarred, muscular tiefling with a glowing chest and no apparent murderous intentions makes everyone want to talk to her, even goblins. Astarion vanishes immediately; you can only hope someone's keeping an eye on him. Wyll and Gale wander into the crowd and disappear.

You're left alone with Lae'zel. She trails close behind you, unwilling to socialise. You must make a funny pair, the large armoured gith trailing behind the little halfling bard. Some of the visitors look at Lae'zel with apparent recognition, but Lae'zel lets you take the lead anyway, with something like a very angry version of shyness.

The beer is surprisingly good. You make the mistake of accepting the drink before checking where it came from.

"The inn we burned down! Cellar was full of it! We got a duke *and* a load of booze!"

The goblin tending the barbecue and doling out mugs of ale is a chatty one. She's roasting large joints of meat over a fire.

"Which one?" you ask.

"The brown stuff what gets you drunk," she says.

"No, which duke?"

"Eh? I dunno, 'e was a fancy one," she shrugs. "You wanna leg o' dwarf?"

You decline. You drift over to where one of the goblins is running a little stall, with armour and weapons laid out on a trading-mat of rough hide.

"Bumper haul, eh?" the trader says proudly, when he sees you looking.

"All from the raid?"

"That's right. Proper city-made stuff, right from the duke's soldiers. Look at these swords – that's quality, made of proper steel. Worth about fifty gold in the city. I'd give it to you for ten, though."

"I'll think about it," you say. "Are you selling anything that belonged to the duke himself?"

"Bah... No, Minthara sent him right to Moonrise with all his stuff," says the goblin. "Didn't get the chance. But I *do* have a signet ring here, made of real gold – see?"

"Do you know who he was?" you ask.

"Eh? I dunno. One of the tall ones."

"Was he human?" you ask.

The goblin scratches his head. "Which one's which again?" he asks.

You shrug, guessing that this particular line of inquiry is going nowhere.

You decide to try chatting up some of the visiting non-goblins instead. There are knots of them scattered across the party, all of them glancing nervously at the goblins around them, their discomfort obvious. You spot a drow man with striking red eyes walking through the temple doors, his nose stuck in the air, not speaking to anyone. A group of uniformed visitors catch your eye.

"Your gith saved some of our lads on the road the other day," one of them tells you. She's a fellow halfling, her midnight-blue cloak matching all the others of her retinue of humans and half-elves. According to the brooch she has discreetly pinned to her lapel, these dark-clad visitors are Zhentarim. Smugglers, then; here to peddle and trade with the goblins. "Rugan and his boy. Didn't know you were True Souls – we'd have offered you an escort here."

"Special business offer for True Souls?" you say.

"Of course. The Absolute has been nothing but good for business," says the Zhent. She's pretty, with close-cropped hair and a charming, rakish smile. "And I never say no to a new trade alliance. This place isn't half bad."

You note the gleaming steel blades of the goblin's weapons, the fine make of their arrows and bows. Someone paid to kit these goblins out, alright. "I didn't think the Zhentarim did business with goblin tribes," you say.

When she hears you say the word *Zhentarim*, she relaxes a little. "Oh, you'd be surprised," she says, and grins. "They find plenty of coin. And goblin prisoners are the best prisoners – scared, beaten, and eager to be elsewhere."

"If they don't let them escape," you say. "I hear they lost a druid."

"It gets worse," says the Zhent. "We sold them an entire wagon of smokepowder, and they lost it. It vanished a little after the druid did."

"Do you think he stole it?" you ask.

"Can't imagine what else happened," she says, "Although I don't know how he pulled it off, if he did. Even a druid like him couldn't get that many barrels to sprout legs and walk away by themselves."

"Minthara must not be happy," you say, angling for confirmation that Minthara is in charge here. The Zhentarim agent nods.

"She's tearing the place to bits, so she is," says the Zhent amusedly. "Taking her time with the payment, as well. But we'll get our due. I'm a patient woman."

Karlach, meanwhile, is over by the 'sports field', talking to a goblin guarding a cage.

"Chicken chasing," says the goblin.

"That's not a chicken," Karlach is saying, "That's a baby owlbear. Look, it's got four legs."

"It has feathers, don't it?" says the goblin. "And it runs away. You chasing or not?"

Karlach makes a face at you when you catch her eye. She seems to have things under control.

You find a gaggle of off-duty goblin guards playing a drinking game around a corner. They're drunk and insensible enough to answer any and all questions, none of the answers proving to be in any way helpful.

"How did Halsin escape?" you ask the most sober partygoer, who is a towering bugbear gulping back mugs of ale like they're water. She's swaying in her seat, obviously completely langered, but she still remembers how to speak Common, unlike most of her drinking companions.

The bugbear belches. "Dunno," she grunts. "Wasn't my fault."

"Do you know who the Grand Duke was that was kidnapped?"

"Dunno," the bugbear repeats. "Wasn't my fault either."

"What's a True Soul?"

She makes a low noise in her throat. Eventually she says, "Dunno."

You've never seen a bugbear this closely. she's sitting down, so you can clearly see her face (they usually tower over you and throw things from a distance). She has coarse fur and small tusks, a beard of wiry hairs framing her chin, and a black nose, a bit like a dog's. She looks more like a warg than a bear to you.

"What *do* you know?" you ask her patiently.

Her face takes on a look of deep thoughtfulness.

Eventually she rumbles, "I ate a gnome's baby."

"Well done," you sigh.

Your group has splintered apart. You've lost sight of everyone else, mostly. That's probably for the best: you'll stand out a lot less if you explore in small groups. You glance back at Lae'zel, still lingering behind you, her tiny flat nose held haughtily in the air. She hesitates when she sees you looking, though; waiting to follow your lead.

She must be out of her element. Her youth and lack of real-world experience is probably failing her now. She's got the skill and confidence of a military commander, but certainly not the kind of open mind she would need to tackle goblins in their own home. The amount of times someone has thrown a glass bottle full of their own piss at Lae'zel is probably zero.

"Are you alright?" you ask her.

Lae'zel scowls.

"I have read about the combat and invasion practices of goblins," she says. "I have slain several on the battlefield. But I was not prepared for how utterly despicable they would be under circumstances of peace."

She says *peace* like it's a dirty word. Maybe it is, in githyanki.

"Well, this is a party," you say. "Most of the people we're speaking to are drunk."

She sneers. "Alcohol is a foul poison that dulls the mind and senses," she says, "Your plane's fascination with it is as nonsensical as it is repulsive."

"I know some of the monks at the Unrolling Scroll who would agree with you," you say. "What are your parties like?"

She gives you a scornful look. "We did not waste time on such frivolous activities on Crèche K'llir."

"The githyanki don't have anything like this at all?"

Lae'zel huffs. You assume that Lae'zel finds this question so stupid, she's simply choosing not to answer it. It surprises you when, after a pause, Lae'zel says, "In Tu'narath."

"Tu'narath?"

"There are songs sung in praise of Vlaakith..." Her eyebrows are furrowed, as though she's recalling something very obscure. "...And dancing. The musicians study the arts and instruments of all the planes, with eternity to master their craft. There are celebrations of glory in battle, or to mark the passage of history, for the warriors who ascend to the City of Death, Tu'narath. It is a privilege only for the mighty."

This is such a strange and abstract thing for Lae'zel to say that you're not quite sure how to respond. Lae'zel doesn't seem sure what she thinks of it, herself.

"You must be looking forward to it," you say, "When you're promoted to a dragon-rider."

The uncertainty wipes itself from Lae'zel's face. She clicks her teeth. "I fight for my queen," she says contemptuously, "I need no reward."

You finally spot Shadowheart and see that she's over by the 'chicken' cage, mind-controlling a goblin. She's not even remotely attempting to hide it – she's clutching her temple with one hand and waving the other vaguely at the goblin, squinting. It couldn't be more obvious. Your mother trained these habits out of you by early childhood. Then again, it's not like Shadowheart remembers her childhood.

By the time you and Lae'zel have gotten over there, they've already opened the cage. The owlbear cub inside is truly little, the size of a small dog, and it shivers as the door creaks open.

"Shadowheart," you begin. "It's small and harmless *now*—"

"I'm keeping it," she says defensively. "We kept Astarion."

It's much of a muchness; as soon as there's enough space for it to escape, the owlbear cub bolts. It vanishes through the nearest gap in the crumbling stone walls and out of sight.

"Oh," says Shadowheart, with a note of disappointment.

"Hey-o, party people, I've got bad news," says Karlach, jogging over. "Don't look now, but there's a gaggle of humans over by that pillar and we know two of them. I think I managed to tadpole them into not spotting me *this* time, but..."

Lae'zel and Shadowheart surreptitiously look away. you glance and spot the brother and sister from before, the ones who tried to take the artefact from you, who Karlach left bleeding on the ground. Evidently, they got better.

"We need to move inside," you say. "Before they recognise us."

"Good idea," says Karlach, "I've cracked their skulls once, that's enough for me."

You tug Shadowheart away from the owlbear cage. You spot Gale near the music, where a human man in a ragged Volo costume is being made to sing. You didn't peg him immediately as being human, because he seems to be singing in Goblinoid. Whatever he's singing, it involves repeating *Dror Ragzlin* over and over, usually preceded by an awkward pause, and it only sort of rhymes.

You beeline for Gale before he can do or say anything, but you're too late. Gale is engaged in conversation with a goblin woman, who appears to be shaking her head in scorn.

"He's my pigeon," says the woman.

"That's Volo," Gale is saying, "That's – that's a very venerable musician and author. You – how did you – where did you–?"

"Gale!" You push through the crowd. "What are you doing?!"

Gale turns to you and says, "Trying to get Volo–"

"Of course that's not Volo singing for these goblins!" you exclaim. "Never mind the singer – where are Astarion and Wyll?"

"Yeah, shove off," says the woman, "Tryin' to take my pigeon. He's mine. Get yer own."

"*No, wait!*" The man who looks a bit like Volo catches you entirely off-guard by shouting at you in Halfling. His accent is simultaneously perfectly fluent and absolutely atrocious. "*Don't leave! Help me! Get me out of here!*"

"Oi!" the goblin woman barks. "What's that you're squawking?! I wanna hear another one about Dror Ragzlin!"

"Yes! Of course, Gribbo, my dear!" the man trills. Gods, he even *sounds* like Volo. He must be an impersonator.

You see protest rising in Gale's face and yank his wrist. Any halfling who attends school for any length of time learns the trick very fast of how to twist a tallfolk's balance using only their fingerbones, and you use this schoolyard trick to pull Gale out of the crowd and back towards Karlach, Shadowheart, and Lae'zel, all of whom are staring at something apparently very interesting on the other side of the party.

You turn around and see Wyll's fist making full contact with the face of a goblin, who he appears to be in the middle of beating to a pulp while a crowd of onlookers cheer.

"You are all terrible at serving the Absolute," you say quietly. "We are never going to be sent to Moonrise. You are terrible True Souls."

"I am *doing my best* to serve the Absolute," Gale protests, "It just so happens that, I'm *really* quite sure that's--"

"Wyll's *fine*, don't worry! Oh, look, there's Astarion," says Karlach, pointing. Astarion is... using his tadpole to mind-control Gribbo.

"Gods almighty," you mutter, closing your eyes.

On the other side of the courtyard, Wyll gives his opponent one final box and he topples to the ground. The assorted crowd cheers, which is much better than the alternative, but is *also* really increasing the chances one of the Absolutist siblings are going to spot you. You make a beseeching face at Astarion and he makes a point of turning his back on you and continuing his conversation with Gribbo, which you *know* he's just doing to spite you.

Gold is changing hands in the crowd. Karlach manages to pull Wyll away from a second match and shepherds him through the temple doors. Astarion saunters over, calm and leisurely, random man in tow.

"Have you met Gribbo's pigeon?" Astarion says. "He--"

"Never mind that!" you say, "We need to go inside!"

Finally you manage to corral your group of errant adventurers plus one past the ogre guarding the doors and into the temple complex's large arched doorway. You pull the doors behind you, vengefully, and the sound of them slamming shut ricochets through the tall vaulted ceilings. You can see more goblins further into the building, but none of them in immediate earshot.

You glare at the others.

"We're good," says Karlach, throwing you a thumbs-up. "The siblings who attacked us yesterday didn't notice us. I was watching."

You throw a wordless, helpless gesture at the human musician that Astarion took from Gribbo, who is still there.

"Er, I mean, praise the Absolute," Karlach adds.

You rub your temples. "Astarion," you begin.

"My dear friend Evening Tavernsong," says Astarion, voice dripping with mocking sweetness, "May I introduce to you the world-famous bard, author, and covert investigator of the Absolute, Volothamp Geddarm."

"Yes, very funny," you snap, "Why did you take him with you?"

"Why, because my heart breaks to see a poor, innocent human captive!" Astarion raises his eyebrows in mock indignation. "And because I recognise a good lead when I see it. This *is* the real Volo, and he's here trying to solve the mystery of the Absolute. Isn't that right, Volo?"

The man who looks like Volo clears his throat. He *does* look like Volo. he's got the cap and the feather, the stupid breeches, the curling black mustache and beard, just how they were in the illustration of Volo that your mother kept pinned to the inside cover of her notebook.

"Evening Tavernsong..." says the man you *really don't want to be Volo*, "Surely not the daughter of the late Sunrise Tavernsong?"

You fight back a gag. "And you really *had* to let him go *now*?" you say to Astarion. "We couldn't have picked him up on the way out?"

"Oh, I thought we ought to have a little conversation..." Astarion reaches into his pockets and brings out a stack of papers, which he holds out to an already-eagerly-approaching Gale.

"...About what he's found already. After all, according to his letters, he's been here since the Nautiloid crashed, trying to figure out what the goblins are up to."

"Eh – what!" Volo's hands fly to his own pockets, then to his breeches. "Now just one moment, sir, you are holding in your hands a *very precious manuscript!* Not to mention—"

"Believe me, your accounts of goblin night life are anything but," mutters Astarion, "And if you're trying to ascertain the location of your invisibility potion – you no longer own one. Now then..."

He pauses, holding up a hand for silence. A few seconds later a wandering goblin guard, a torch held in one hand, passes by the doorway. She glances at you, but doesn't stop. you wait as she crosses, then vanishes, her footfalls fading out of earshot.

"Er-*hem*," says Volo, and performs a quick, flourishing bow, nudging the cap on his head. "Well, as much as I'd like to introduce myself under more polite circumstances... It is so! I am *the* Volothamp Geddarm, famed author, actor, and purveyor of truths most dazzling. And, guilty as charged, I have infiltrated this encampment in order to learn of their mysterious new god – the Absolute."

"There," says Astarion, with some satisfaction. "And all it took was a little nudge from a tadpole to a goblin."

Gale is flicking through the pages, back and forth. A frown is growing on his lips, a crease in his brow.

"So what have you learned?" says Shadowheart. "Who is the Absolute?"

"Well!" Volo puffs out his chest. "I first learned of their existence in Baldur's Gate. Rumours of a new cult, served by wicked sages who appear to possess unique powers of mind control, who claim the existence of a new god called the Absolute, and call themselves *True Souls!*"

"We already knew that," says Shadowheart.

"Aha, well, there's more," Volo continues, "These True Souls and their cultists... appear to be taking orders from a place named *Moonrise!*"

"We already knew that as well," says Wyll.

"Oh, but what's *this*," Volo adds, "At Moonrise, the Absolute has appointed at least one Chosen – a god's representative, imbued with magical power, walking the planes!"

"In the hopes of hearing something we *don't* know," says Gale, "Who created the cult of the Absolute in the first place?"

Volo twirls the ends of his moustache.

"That is, unfortunately, where the results of my research fall short. My current theory," says Volo grandly, "Is that it is surely the doing of...a dragon."

He waits for a response. There is only silence.

"*Which* dragon?" says Shadowheart.

"...An *evil* dragon," says Volo. "Perhaps bronze in colour."

"And upon what basis did you arrive at this conclusion?" says Gale.

"Well, you see, when you really think about it," says Volo grandly, "*Everything* is the doing of one evil dragon or another."

"So that's it? That's all you've learned from being here?" demands Astarion. "What about the tadpoles?"

"What tadpoles?" says Volo.

Astarion gives a scoff of disgust in response.

"The True Souls have mind flayer tadpoles," says Wyll, "Altered by Netherese magic, by perpetrators unknown. That's where they get the powers. Do you know who or what could be behind that?"

Volo strokes his goatee thoughtfully.

"Ah, well, that's quite impossible," says Volo. "You see, mind flayer parasites are too fast – they consume the victim within days. That theory simply cannot be true. You may disregard it. Any other questions?"

"Astarion, give him his potion back," you say, rubbing your temples, "I want him gone."

"Ugh. Fine."

Astarion sticks a hand in his pockets and comes out with his finger and thumb wrapped around the neck of an invisible bottle. With incredible carelessness, he tosses the bottle at Volo, who somehow manages to catch it without it smashing.

"Ah! Much obliged, my dear good man!" There's a *pop* as Volo removes the bottle's invisible cork. "Onwards with courage, my heroic friends! I shall see you wherever else the truth roams!"

Then, to add insult to injury, Volo tips his stupid feathered cap at you specifically.

"Miss Tavernsong," he says. "A terrible shame about your mother. She was, err, well..."

"Get out," you scowl, pulling the heavy front doors open a crack.

"You know, I *have* always had some questions..." says Volo.

You nudge Volo's elbow on the arm that's holding the invisibility potion, spilling the contents down his front. Volo's form vanishes in an instant.

The only trace of his passage out of the temple is a whoosh and a whiff of perfume in the air as he, invisibly, bows.

"Adieu! Farewell! Till next time!" he calls grandly. You vengefully close the door behind him.

Lae'zel looks ready to murder someone.

"Was there any point to all of that nonsense?" she asks. "We have compromised our cover to rescue a halfwit with no information whatsoever."

"I don't know if I'd say that," murmurs Gale, tidying Volo's notes into a neat stack. "He recorded a frankly unnecessary amount of data about goblin lifestyles."

"Did he record anything useful?" Wyll asks.

Gale snaps his fingers. A transparent scrap of glowing blue magic lights up at his fingertips.

"Almost nothing," Gale grins, the light dancing in his hand, "But he *saw* far more than he recorded. Specifically, he's explored almost every corner of this temple... and has developed a detailed inner map of its layout. Part of a little experiment of mine to determine the precise difference between the minds of the infected, uninfected, and the branded."

"Oh, now *that* is sneaky," says Astarion, "You were reading his mind? How long have you been able to do that?"

Gale's grin widens. "Who knows? I've never tried till now."

Gale makes a flourishing gesture. the magic at his fingers reforms, expanding and solidifying. It creates a blue, translucent diagram. A floorplan.

"*This* is the living quarters of Priestess Gut, the goblins' spiritual leader..." Gale indicates an area at the bottom of a stairway, its entrance tucked into the very corners of the complex. "And behind it, through this passage, is a locked door the goblins haven't been able to open. There's a secret way out of the temple."

"We just need to walk through the bedchamber of one of the camp's leaders to get there," says Shadowheart dryly, "Wonderful."

"Would you prefer fighting through the party outside?" says Gale.

"Fair point," says Shadowheart. "Alright, then. Where are the prisoners kept?"

"Here." Gale indicates a spot on the illusion. "And as far as Volo knew... *This* is where the goblins keep their valuables hidden."

"You got all that using the tadpole?" Karlach asks.

Gale says, "Oh, I hardly needed the tadpole at all. I pushed the slightest bit of divination magic towards him and his mind opened right up. It was just full of holes. Like a Rashemi cheese."

"What else did he know?" you ask.

Gale gestures. three ethereal figures appear, tucked in various corners of the sanctum.

"Dror Ragzlin is a hobgoblin," says Gale, "He united the goblin tribes together shortly before the cult made its move. Priestess Gut has a lot of influence on him. And Minthara is a drow officer who was sent here by the commanders of Moonrise Towers."

"In other words," says Astarion, "Someone brainwashed the local goblins and sent a lackey to oversee the process."

"Couldn't have put it better myself," says Gale, dismissing his illusion with a wave of his hand. "Come on, let's see what we can discover."

You join the various parties of mercenaries scurrying through the temple. Most are goblins, some aren't. they all move quickly and furtively, on their way elsewhere. Sentries with steel-tipped arrows and leery eyes patrol the halls, silent. The atmosphere is much more formal than any other goblin camp you've seen before. The only raised voice comes from the centre of the hall, where a goblin in decorated caster's robes is proselytising in front of a roaring brazier.

"Listen!" she calls. She addresses a congregation of three kneeling goblins, spreading her arms wide. "Can you hear her voice?"

"I only hear her through you!" wails one of the goblins.

"Show us, Priestess Gut!" begs another. "Show us the Absolute!"

Priestess Gut lowers her hands, as though blessing the goblins; then she puts her fingers to her temples, and – in a way that's becoming increasingly recognisable to you – uses her tadpole.

You feel it as soon as she does. It rattles the inside of your skull. your otherwise-still tadpole perks up, eager. Psionic waves roll off Priestess Gut, making the goblins cry out in ecstasy.

One of the goblins throws himself forward. "Give me the Mark!" They cry. "I'm ready, Priestess Gut! I want to serve her!"

Priestess Gut's face wrinkles into a smile. It's rare to see old goblins, but she's an old, wiry woman. Her face is lined and cragged with age. Her body and movements are lithe, though; still fit enough to fight. You watch as she pulls the handle of a poker from the burning brazier.

"Thank you!" the goblin cries, ecstatic. "Oh, thank you!"

You avert your gaze as Priestess Gut brands the eyelid of the new initiate. It isn't pretty to listen to, all the same.

Gale leads you through a long, dark passageway and into one of the stinking chambers that serves as the goblins' jails. (They have several, presumably for the sake of convenience. Goblins love jails.) There's no living prisoners remaining. A dead goblin lies in a cage hanging over a deep, black chasm.

"There's an awful lot of chasms around here," says Wyll.

"We're right above the Underdark," says Gale, "This landscape is full of caves and tunnels... and perilous drops, alongside. Watch your step."

The next jail you visit is quieter, tucked into what appears to have once been a chapel of some kind. It's been since repurposed into a warg-and-prisoner holding pen by the goblins.

This, apparently, is the jail Halsin escaped from. Apparently they'd managed to trap Halsin in one of their warg-pens while he was transformed as a bear. It had not occurred to them, apparently, that he might be able to transform into anything else. The goblins here are more talkative, sealed away from the quiet, tense atmosphere of the main hall.

"Minthara's always been off her rocker, but she went *really* mental after the prisoners broke out," one of the sentries tells you. She scratches an ear. "She says from here on, every time we make a mistake she's gonna chop off one of Skrut's fingers."

"How many escaped?" you ask.

"There was only two of them," says the sentry gloomily, "The druid ran and took his mate with him before we could finish torturing him."

"I could've broken him," says another goblin.

"No, you couldn't of," says the first, "Everyone knows you're too soft with the corkscrews."

As far as you know, Halsin came here with a band of mercenaries. The other prisoner, then, must be one of Aradin's gang.

"What did you get from him?" you ask.

"Bugger all," says the sentry gloomily. "Hope Skrut's not gonna miss using his hands too much."

It becomes clear pretty quickly that there are no more prisoners in the temple, or any trace of where they might have gone. You know nothing about druidcraft, but Halsin was an Archdruid – certainly he could wild-shape. Once he was out of sight, he could have escaped in any number of ways. A fly, a mole, a spider – anything small would simply have blended into the dirt and shadows.

"So why didn't he go back?" Wyll muses aloud, when the last holding cell turns out to be completely empty. "Where did he go, if not home?"

"Somewhere less imminently on the way to destruction, perhaps," Astarion suggests.

Gale lowers his voice.

"There's a locked door in the next chamber," he murmurs, "If there's anything valuable to be found here, including the relic, it'll be in the cavern behind that door. It goes without saying that the place is heavily guarded at all times."

"Please. If it's guarded by *goblins*, it's practically free for the taking," says Astarion. "Leave the door to me."

"Can you distract the guards for a minute or two?" Gale says.

It takes a moment for you to realise he's addressing you.

"Me?" you say. "How?"

Gale raises an eyebrow. "You're the bard," he says. "I thought perhaps you could use your lute...?"

"Oh. Sorry, I forgot."

You hear Lae'zel give a *ch'k!* of derision as you snap open your lute-case. The sound of the strings ringing as you jostle Lihala is uncomfortably loud in the quiet sanctum.

"Alright," you say, "I'll buy you as much time as I can."

Gale grins. "Break a leg," he says.

You walk alone through the dark, into the next chamber.

You haven't performed for an audience since your mother died. The thought sends a little thrill of stagefright down your spine. But it turns out to be moot. you open the door and there's already an audience, drow and goblins both, crowded around, watching something.

A dead mind flayer. You haven't seen any since the Nautiloid, and never dead. This is clearly some sort of throne-room, dominated by a large impressive chair ornamented with goblin-bones and furs, and on the raised plinth housing the throne, the mind flayer's corpse is strewn across the floor. Its tentacled, purple-skinned head is slightly shrunken with rot, its body battered and broken like a dead cat on Wrym's Crossing. Standing over it is a large, muscular hobgoblin, twice the size of his smaller goblin cousins.

The hobgoblin doesn't seem comfortable as a spellcaster. He reads from a scroll, his hand movements clumsy.

"Cum mortuis..." He waves his large hand. "...In lingua mortua!"

The words are magical, but the gesture and delivery are not. You recognise the incantation almost immediately, your mind eagerly unearthing memories of old bodies long forgotten. The hobgoblin glares at the corpse of the mind flayer, which lies unmoving in response to the fumbled spell.

"*Tnak!* You *will* tell me your secrets!" roars the hobgoblin, and levels a kick at the body. That's your queue, then, to step up, lute in hand. You won't be needing to play. That's fortunate. You aren't used to playing music for an audience, but you are certainly used to dead bodies.

You feel the tadpole inside the mind of the hobgoblin before he feels yours. He must be Dror Ragzlin, then, the third True Soul in the camp. "True Soul," you say, letting your voice carry loudly through the throne-room, "Need a hand from a spellcaster?"

Dror Ragzlin looks over you. His nose is hooked, his brow thick and severe; it gives him a sort of perpetual scowl. A grin spreads across his face as he takes you in, and you feel his door in your mind elbow clumsily open, his voice ringing clear as day in your ears even as his lips stay utterly still.

A fellow True Soul, eh? Dror Ragzlin's voice rumbles across your brain. *You're new around here.*

"You cast the spell, I ask the questions," Dror Ragzlin says, aloud. His spoken voice is a little rougher, more accented, than the one in your head. "Got it?"

You allow the rest of the room, the dungeon, to fall away. Dror Ragzlin offers you the scroll, and you take it, already knowing the words written on the other side. Weave-words, a spell-scroll fresh and potent enough to be cast by anybody literate enough to read the inscription. The crowd of assorted goblins bow and scramble away to make a path for you, and you hop onto the stage to stand over the dead mind flayer.

Part of you hopes to recognise it; that perhaps you will get revenge on the mind flayer that held your face and inserted a tadpole into it. You don't, though. This one is small, its weird skin-robos plainer.

At the back of the group you can feel your companions, fellow True Souls, wriggling in your awareness along with Dror Ragzlin. Shadowheart is thrumming with anxiety, her fear bubbling stronger as you approach the dead ilithid. But you know enough about the art to understand what you're doing. you are a servant of the Absolute, determined to further her reach. The best actors are the ones who can fool even themselves. All eyes in the room are on you.

"Cum mortuis in lingua mortua," you recite, the words familiar on your lips. The wispy traces of the mind flayer's ghost dance at the sound, and the ilithid's dead eyes open, necromancy shining out of the empty pupils. The corpses lift off the ground very slightly, as though weightless.

This spell is practically a nursery rhyme to you. If there's enough spirit-stuff left in the body, it'll wake up, answer five questions, and die again forever. It can't understand anything new, it can recognise faces, and it speaks only the languages it knew in life. Mind flayers don't have mouths, so presumably the corpse will either fail to say anything or start beaming corpse-words directly into your mind.

Either way...

You wait until Dror Ragzlin's impatience overtakes him. He barks, "Is it working?"

And, faithfully, you repeat, "Is it working?"

In your mind a raspy voice wheezes: *Yes*.

"Evidently it is," you say, mentally counting down to four.

Dror Ragzlin gives you a scowl.

You add, "What did you want to ask?"

Nothing, says the dead mind flayer.

"Whoops," you say sweetly.

Three.

Wisely, Dror Ragzlin keeps his mouth shut as he gives the corpse an irritable kick. He says, through gritted teeth: "I need to know who killed it."

"Killed what?" you ask.

Me, says the mind flayer.

You fail to suppress a smirk. Dror Ragzlin's nostrils flare. The crowd of assorted goblins has fallen into sniggers and whispers, their attention clearly rapt. The drow are staring at the proceedings with obvious amusement.

Dror Ragzlin attempts to claw open your mind.

You barely catch him in time. You feel your tadpole writhe in anticipation, and just before it hits you fill yourself with fiction. You twist the strings of your adventure, rearrange the characters, and let Dror Ragzlin into your head.

I love the Absolute. I'm just joking around, ha ha, isn't this funny. I sure hope this True Soul doesn't mind, because I love him. I love him like I love the Absolute, because she is us, the best of us. to love her is to love completely, utterly, wholly; to be in her embrace is to know peace. Many hearts, one mind; many minds, one song...

He gives a grunt. You feel his satisfaction, his respect, wriggling inside him like an eel.

"Enough playing games," he mutters. "Ask it where the weapon is."

"Do you know where the weapon is?" you ask.

Yes.

"Where?"

The last response comes to you not in words, but as a flash of images. Scattered memories, a kaleidoscope of scenes all happening at once. You can barely pick apart the response.

A pond full of tadpoles. The Nautiloid, just as it was; falling through the hells, githyanki in pursuit. This mind flayer killed scores of them, or sent the ship's tentacles to grab them; they kept coming, in waves, looking for something, something that had been stolen from them...

And there, clutching the stolen object in her hands, is a woman with a dancing black braid and hollow circles etched into her armour, staring out with the familiar eyes of—

"I don't know who that is," you say, "Do you?"

"No," growls Dror Ragzlin.

The spell ends. The magic dispels and fizzles out of the mind flayer's body, and it drops limply to the stone floor. You glance out at the assorted crowd. they're all goblins and drow, no adventurers in sight.

Dror Ragzlin raises a bare foot and crushes the mind flayer's broken skull underfoot, popping it with a black, bloody splatter.

"Useless!" he bellows. "Just a bloody piece of meat!"

Behind him, you see the drow murmuring to each other, snickering. Some of the goblins scatter, waiting until they're just out of slingshot range before erupting into bouts of mocking laughter.

"You!" Dror Ragzlin roars at the remaining goblins. "Get your arses out of here and find that half-human, *now!*"

That humbles the crowd. They bow, scrape, and scramble away. You incline your head respectfully to Dror Ragzlin, trying your best to look like you're at his service.

"There's a tomb complex near the crash site," you say, "Should we search there?"

Dror Ragzlin growls, "What? You should have searched there already! Go! I need to report this to Minthara."

You cower politely – this is how goblins communicate with each other – and perform the traditional scurry away from the angry hobgoblin as quickly as possible.

You turn the mind flayer's kaleidoscope of memories over in your head. It's a little like trying to remember a dream.

The githyanki weren't chasing the Nautiloid because it had mind flayers on it.

No, it was bigger than that. They were chasing it because it had Shadowheart on it.

And Shadowheart's artefact isn't just an artefact – it's a stolen githyanki weapon.

You dip your head for a moment.

Shar, Mistress of Loss, you pray silently, Lady of Sorrows, devourer of secrets, watcher of grief: please cover my ass for the next hour or so, just enough for me to get out of this stupid goblin camp, and I can take it from there.

Only once you're back in the main complex do you realise you never set a rendezvous with the others. The corridors are empty, voices and murmurs bouncing off the stone walls and archways with no clear source. You attempt to remember the floorplan Gale showed you and recall only that it was blue and inscrutable. You're about to pick a random direction and start walking when Astarion suddenly steps out from behind a pillar, scaring the life out of you.

You look for the others, but they're nowhere to be seen.

"Already at the secret exit," says Astarion, "They thought it would be uncharitable to leave you behind, so here I am. Wonderful performance, by the way! You must be a natural. You play an excellent buffoon."

You roll your eyes. "Did you find anything behind the locked door?" you ask.

"Nothing interesting," he answers, far too casually.

You study his waistcoat, which is as smooth and normal-shaped as ever.

"Your pockets are whispering," you say eventually.

"Are they? How unusual."

"If you found iron that whispers, give it to Karlach," you say. "The blacksmith at the Grove says he can use it to fix her heart."

"Oh? Pity. I *did* like this one." He reaches behind him and from – somewhere? – produces an entire whispering shortsword.

"Alright," you say, "The *books* I can understand – "

"You underestimate me."

"– But there's no way you had that thing in your trousers this whole time."

"As the orc once said," says Astarion, "To the gnome maiden."

"Let me guess: you stole a Bag of Holding from the goblins?"

"You think too little of me, my small friend," says Astarion. "I stole this Bag of Holding from Gale."

He takes it out and shows it to you. It's the plain drawstring bag from earlier, the one from Withers.

Astarion gives you a sharp-toothed grin. "And I don't believe for a second that Gale didn't recognise it immediately. I don't know if you heard, but he's something of a *gourmand* when it comes to magical objects."

"...He *eats* them?"

"Not this one. He can fucking starve," says Astarion cheerfully. "He tucked this little thing away for a midnight snack, no doubt. Rather selfishly, I might add – this thing could make us a *fortune*."

"If we live to sell it," you say.

"I was more thinking of stealing *things*, putting them in the bag, taking them out later, and selling *those*," says Astarion, "But we'll keep that option in the backs of our minds too. Come along."

Nobody sees you. You make it from one side of the complex to the other without even catching sight of a single goblin. Astarion seems to have a preternatural sense of where every patrol and guard is, as though he's been spying on the goblins for weeks.

A narrow passage with a low ceiling leads you to the hidden area Gale found on the map. The others are waiting there, looking for all the world like a party of thieves rather than a party of adventurers. They're laden down with sacks and bags, looking bored and furtive.

"We aren't going to see Minthara first?" you say, looking at the packed bags.

"It seems unnecessary," says Wyll. "The object we're looking for isn't here."

You nod. "Now what?"

"Nobody's noticed anything amiss with us so far," says Gale, "Let's leave through the back door before anyone notices we're gone."

"I don't see a back door," you comment.

"You will. It's a classic – hidden door behind a tile puzzle." Gale nudges one of the floor-tiles with a foot. it produces a deep rumbling noise as a circular section in the middle rotates. Ancient stone and magic mechanisms, still intact after all this time. Whenever a dungeon falls into disrepair, the traps and the locks always stay intact while everything else rots away. That's what your mother would say.

"Do you know how to solve it?" you ask.

Gale grins. "I have yet to meet a puzzle I couldn't crack within minutes," he says. "It shouldn't be a problem."

Everyone else seems happy to let Gale play with the tiles alone. Lae'zel stands off the side, arms crossed, a look of disgust still on her face. Shadowheart fidgets, running her fingers over the wound on her palm – with her hands empty, fortunately. You remember what you saw in the mind flayer's memories. Shadowheart, standing among the dead and dying githyanki, artefact in hand. The mind flayers had stolen it...

"Are we sure we don't want to report to Minthara?" you say. "She's been giving orders from Moonrise. One of the three chosen has her under personal supervision."

"Well, we don't know her," says Gale, with a cheerful shrug. "She's hardly going to help us get to Moonrise without extorting some work out of us first. We know the way without her."

"What?" says Shadowheart.

"Three chosen for three True Souls," says Wyll, watching Gale turn the tiles on the floor around. "But whoever delivers the weapon to Moonrise gets to become the fourth. We'd better get a move on."

"What are you talking about?" says Shadowheart. "We need to leave – we're going back to the Grove."

Gale's voice takes on that patient teacher's cadence.

"If we take the artefact to Moonrise," he says, "We'll be heralded as heroes by the Absolute."

"No," says Shadowheart, "That's... why would you want to go to Moonrise?"

"That's where the Chosen are right now," Wyll says. "Her mouthpieces. We can find the weapon and take it to them."

"This is our mission," says Lae'zel. "Why do we waste time chattering?"

"She's right, Shadowheart," you say, "We'd better go."

Shadowheart takes a step back.

"No," she says, "I..."

"We don't have to stick around the goblins," says Karlach, "We could go there ourselves. We know the way."

"No reason why Minthara should get any of the credit," Gale notes, "She's the one who failed to find it when the ship crashed."

Shadowheart's eyes flick over to yours. Her shoulders are high, tense.

"Don't you want to go to Moonrise, Shadowheart?" you ask her.

She takes another step back.

"It doesn't matter what she wants," says Astarion. "That's where we're going."

Shadowheart stares. Her green eyes flick from face to face, wide and wary.

"This isn't right," she says. "How did you know there's three chosen? Nobody told us..."

Gale explains, calmly: "The Absolute showed us. She didn't show you?"

"There's an elf in armour," says Wyll. "A human man, well-dressed. And a third one, as well..."

Shadowheart takes another step back.

"No," she says. "No, no... Don't you remember the mind flayers? The parasites? We're *dying*!"

"Dying? I feel fine," says Karlach, "We all do. Come on, Shads, you're talking nonsense."

Shadowheart's voice wavers. "No," she stammers, "The Absolute did something to you. To all of you!"

"Shadowheart," you say.

When she hears your voice, fear ripples across her face, sparks behind her eyes. Why? Shadowheart knows you love her. The feeling is deep, warm, all-encompassing. You've loved her from the moment you met her, and realised she was a True Soul. You love all the True Souls. the Absolute's adoration radiates from them and from inside you like the warm glow of a fire.

"Are we going to have to *make* you go to Moonrise?" you ask, and Shadowheart stares at you, lips tight.

"Why do you refuse to cooperate?" says Lae'zel. "Our chances of finding the weapon are higher with collaboration. Unless... you *want* to steal the glory from us, and claim it for yourself?"

"She knows something," Astarion says. He's standing in the doorway, blocking Shadowheart's exit. "Isn't it obvious? She's been hiding something from us from the start."

"You wouldn't do that," says Gale, "Would you, Shadowheart?"

Gale moves towards Shadowheart and she stumbles back, as though terrified. Karlach straightens up. She towers over Shadowheart – over all of you, really – and her head is tilted, her expression puzzled, as she takes a slow step after Gale.

"No," says Shadowheart. "Stop. Don't come any closer..."

"Shadowheart, is Astarion telling the truth?" says Karlach. You can hear the hurt in her voice.

Shadowheart's voice is shaking. "I don't... I don't..."

"We could find out, you know," says Astarion, "Just look right into her mind."

"She's shutting us out," says Wyll.

"Why are you doing that?" Karlach says.

More steps back from Shadowheart, but there's nowhere for her to go. The group drifts towards her as she hits the wall, and freezes.

"She can still speak," says Lae'zel. "Or will she only utter more lies? Perhaps she is better executed... for the Absolute."

"For the Absolute," repeats Wyll.

"For the Absolute," repeats Karlach.

"No," says Shadowheart. *"No!"*

She throws out her hand.

Held between her fingers is the artefact, pulsating with energy.

The Absolute is ripped out of your mind. You feel its tendrils tear away from the edges of your thoughts, your feelings, like a wet blanket being peeled. The unfamiliarity only becomes obvious once it's gone, like a droning sound suddenly turning to silence. The intense love – the overwhelming affection, the warmth, the kind you haven't felt in years – turns to shards of ice in your chest.

You stumble, and almost fall over your feet. Karlach *does* fall – she throws herself away from Shadowheart so forcefully she loses her balance.

There's a writhing in your skull. Your tadpole feels alone, unhappy. its discontent mingles with your thoughts, a whisper compared to the deafening roar of the Absolute.

You feel sick. Your knees feel weak. Lae'zel doesn't seem to have any such compunctions. She strides across the chamber and, promptly, punches Shadowheart in the face.

Shadowheart makes an attempt to dodge, but Lae'zel is fast and deadly enough that she still catches Shadowheart in the cheek. The impact almost spins Shadowheart around, and Lae'zel takes the opportunity to pin Shadowheart against the wall by the neck.

Shadowheart gives a strangled cry of pain that ends in a choke as Lae'zel slams her elbow into Shadowheart's gullet.

"Lae'zel!" Wyll cries, springing into action even as you're still reeling from the artifact's effect.

"That relic – belongs – to *us!*" snarls Lae'zel. She drives a knee into Shadowheart's stomach, then twists her into a stranglehold. "A githyanki weapon! Thief! *Hshar'lak!*"

Lae'zel keeps her thin arms wrapped around Shadowheart's neck. Shadowheart chokes, struggling to speak, then to breathe, as her face starts to turn red. then she unhooks her mace from her belt and slams it behind her, into Lae'zel's ribs, over and over, until the stranglehold loosens. Shadowheart throws herself away as Lae'zel unsheathes her sword, steel ringing in the still air.

"Stop it!" Wyll shouts. "Shadowheart saved us, Lae'zel! That relic is the only thing keeping us sane – *stop fighting!*"

You see Karlach picking herself up, glancing at her burning hands and then at the fighting women, frowning. You watch Gale mutter a spell to himself only to hold it at his fingertips,

uncast. You should do something too – say something – but your head keeps reeling, your chest aching and hollow. You...

...miss the Absolute. It felt like the opposite of lonely.

"We could just let them kill each other and nab the weapon from their bodies, you know," Astarion remarks, unhelpfully, although not loudly enough for Lae'zel or Shadowheart to hear.

Shadowheart barks a spell, sending sparks of magic in Lae'zel's direction. Lae'zel barrels through them, unflinching, and knocks Shadowheart to the ground like a bowling pin. Shadowheart's mace flies from her hand with a clatter. Lae'zel doesn't go so far as stabbing Shadowheart. she holds the cleric at swordpoint, the steel pressing into the skin of her neck.

Shadowheart croaks, "I was... trying... to help you....! You murderous *freak!*"

"You steal from my people," growls Lae'zel, "You deceive us with barefaced lies. You were helping nobody but yourself!"

"We won't get the truth out of Shadowheart like this, Lae'zel!" Wyll says. "Stay your blade. We need to talk."

"Talk!" Lae'zel snaps. "All you people ever do is *talk!*"

Gale's voice is calm, but he holds his staff two-handed, poised for magic. "Lae'zel, if Shadowheart is attuned to that artefact, killing her might end its magical effect," he says. "We'd be back under the control of the Absolute."

Lae'zel gives a grunt of annoyance. She keeps her sword pressed to Shadowheart's throat. But she doesn't do anything more. she narrows her eyes at Shadowheart, the two of them glaring at each other.

You see Shadowheart swallow, very carefully.

"I'm not your enemy," says Shadowheart, although the hatred gleaming in her eyes says something else.

Lae'zel holds, snarling, for a long cold moment.

Eventually, though, she pulls her sword away and steps back.

Shadowheart rubs her throat ruefully.

"Shadowheart," you say, "What's going on?"

The artefact is still in Shadowheart's hands. She looks down at it. Her cheeks are still red.

"I didn't know it was a gith artefact," she says, "But we were sent to steal it and return it to Baldur's Gate."

"We?" echoes Gale. "There was more than just you?"

"I was sent with a group of others from the cloister," Shadowheart says quietly. "I was the only survivor. The others were all killed. By the mind flayers, or the githyanki."

Lae'zel gives a contemptuous *ch'k!* at that.

"I don't know what it is or what it's for," says Shadowheart, "I just know that it's protecting me – protecting *us* – and it wants to go to Baldur's Gate."

"It *wants* to?" says Wyll. "Is it alive?"

"I – think so," says Shadowheart. "It has a will of its own. It *wanted* to free you from the Absolute, I felt it. And it... follows me. If I'm separated from it, it reappears in my hands."

Lae'zel still has her sword drawn. A frown is spreading across her face.

"Why were you sent to retrieve it?" Lae'zel demands. "How did you discern its location?"

"I don't know," says Shadowheart, "I don't remember. None of us did. We all underwent the same process."

"Shadowheart," says Wyll, "If that artefact belongs to the githyanki..."

"More importantly," says Gale, "If the githyanki are willing to cure us in exchange for it, we can't really afford to refuse. Including you, Shadowheart. You won't be a Sharran any more if you transform into a mind flayer."

Shadowheart hesitates. You can see the question forming in her mind – *what about Halsin?* – and then fading, as she starts thinking of what to say.

"Surrender," says Lae'zel bluntly. "Beseech your goddess for forgiveness, if you must."

"If we go to the githyanki, maybe they'll tell us what the artefact is," you say. "Maybe they know why you were sent to retrieve it."

Shadowheart runs her fingertips over the scar on her hand. Her sign of devotion to her goddess, the void that she sacrificed her memories to. You can see her searching for a lie with her eyes.

You're certain nobody will buy it – look at her! – but she says, "...Fine. I can afford to fail one mission, if it's life or death," and nobody stops her.

Lae'zel tosses her head scornfully. "If I were with my kin, you would be slaughtered for your insolence," she says. "As it stands... I will permit you to live."

"Always the generous, forgiving soul, our Lae'zel," says Astarion, which causes Lae'zel to redirect her aggression towards him. She doesn't hit him, but she sharply rounds in on him like she's seriously considering it.

"*Kainyank!* Enough of your insolent japes!"

"Astarion, you're not helping," says Wyll.

"I know," says Astarion cheerfully, "I'm not trying."

Lae'zel snarls and raises a hand.

"Enough! Please!" Gale raises his palms. "All of us have just had a *very* invasive psionic force in our heads. I think it's understandable that tempers are a little frayed. Let's put our energy towards the more *pressing* concern here – what in the *world* is the Absolute, what did it do to us, and how did that artefact stop it?"

Everyone falls silent a moment. You know that if the Absolute were to come back, you'd welcome it; that makes your skin crawl.

"Could it be true?" you ask. "A new god?"

Gale shakes his head. "Not the *modus operandi* of the gods to use mind flayer psionics," he says. "And I am certain that what we experienced *was* an ilithid power, not the work of any divine being."

"A mind flayer conspiracy, then," says Wyll.

"A mind flayer conspiracy that prevents the victims from transforming into more mind flayers?" says Gale. "Not the *modus operandi* of the Grand Design, either. No, I'm certain that whoever is behind the Absolute must also be behind the Netherese enchantment affecting the tadpoles... whoever that may be."

Lae'zel, finally, sheathes her greatsword. It's shocking how quickly she goes back to normal, as though pinning Shadowheart to the wall and strangling her was just a regular, brisk conversation.

"You draw conclusions too quickly, wizard," she says. "*Ghaik* are creatures of incredible intellect, and capable of acts of manipulation and conspiracy that we could not even comprehend. This *Absolute* is likely one of their schemes."

"I don't know about you, Gale," you say, "But it was definitely a mind flayer that put a tadpole in me."

"Me too," says Karlach. "Could they have been forced? Or tricked, somehow?"

"Few things in this world can manipulate a mind flayer," says Gale. "Nor do they have much of a predilection for magic... Lae'zel, how many spawn can a single mind flayer nautiloid contain?"

She answers, promptly, "No more than two thousand."

"Then," says Gale. "If our perpetrator had access to even just one nautiloid's worth of tadpoles..."

"That's a lot of fucking True Souls," says Karlach, and whistles. "That's bad news. I mean, really *really* bad news. I thought it was just us, but there could be *hundreds* of people out there with worms in their heads!"

"Thousands," says Gale, his brow furrowing, "If they have more than one Nautiloid. Infecting us took barely an instant..."

Nobody says anything for a few seconds.

Tens of thousands of people...

...Selling *that* feeling? You'd have to be stupid to say no.

"We've got to do something," says Wyll.

Gale pauses mid-puzzle.

"And what, in this case, would 'something' look like?," he says.

"Isn't it obvious?" says Wyll. "The Absolute sent an agent here, one who's pulling the strings. Maybe she even knows why we were captured and what's been done to us. We can't leave without confronting Minthara."

Astarion raises a well-groomed eyebrow.

"Yes we can," he says. "It would be extremely easy."

"Then we'd be no closer to the truth," says Wyll.

"And *this* is where you expect to find it? With a random drow who's surrounded herself with goblins?" Astarion scoffs.

"Do you *want* the Absolute in your head?" Shadowheart retorts. "I don't like it, but Wyll is right. Something bigger than us is happening here, and I – we – need to find out what."

Lae'zel, to your surprise, nods. "My duty, above all, is to hunt and exterminate all mind flayers," she says. "If this is a greater ilithid conspiracy, my people must be informed. And if this Minthara woman is a thrall, I am obliged to execute her."

"And the goblins?" you say.

"Weak, unintelligent vermin," says Lae'zel, tossing her head. "Half of them are outside, senseless with drink, and the others scurry around without direction, like wild animals. I could slaughter all of them blindfolded."

"I'm goblin-sized," you remind her. "One goblin could kill me."

"In which case, the pace of our travel would become much faster," scoffs Lae'zel. "You are a lightfoot, are you not? Find a corner to cower in, if you prefer."

"I worked at a *school*," you protest. "I had an *office*. With a little glass ball on my desk. It wasn't a goblin-killing kind of job."

"You will learn. Or you will die." Lae'zel shrugs her bony shoulders. "It makes little difference."

"You're not going to die," says Wyll, because he's Wyll. "It's settled, then. The Absolute is our enemy, and whoever's behind it could be the key to curing the infection. We find Minthara, and we find out what she knows, no matter the cost. And if she stands in our way, we strike her down."

"Well, if there's one thing that this group is good at, it's killing whatever stands in our way," says Astarion. "I *do* enjoy a good murder myself."

"Can you get us to Minthara without the guards spotting us?" Wyll asks him.

"Darling," says Astarion, "I could do it blindfolded."

Wyll thumps his chest. Shadowheart and Lae'zel are back to ignoring each other now. The hunt for the truth and the drow has distracted them both respectively from their dispute, it seems. If Wyll did that on purpose, you're not sure.

"Give me a moment to prepare," says Shadowheart.

She looks shaky and pale, as though sick. Understandable. Lae'zel tried to kill her. But your nurse's instinct takes over as you look at her. "I'll come with you," you say.

Nobody objects to that. They all know as well as you do that Shadowheart might try to escape with the artefact.

You follow her as she walks unsteadily around a corner.

You manage to barely make it out of earshot of the others before Shadowheart collapses. Her knees buckle. She lets out a strangled, helpless sound, her breath shallow and trembling.

Her fingers go to the circular wound.

"...It hurts..." she moans.

You pull the rag you've been using to wrap wild weavemoss in out of your pockets, fold it lengthways, and hold it in front of her face. You say, "Bite."

She manages to bite the cloth before she starts to scream. Her left hand claws uselessly at the scar on her right. You press the rag to her face as she chokes and whimpers, stifling the noise down.

It lasts less than a minute, but it feels longer.

Eventually the whimpers die down to fast shallow breaths, and you pull the cloth away. Another minute and she's panting, sweat running down her face, but sitting upright and in full control of her limbs.

"Is it over?" you say, more to gauge if she can reply than anything else. Shadowheart nods wearily.

It doesn't take long for Shadowheart to catch her breath. You smother your matron's instinct to fix her hair, touch her shoulders. Shadowheart isn't one of the children. There are no more children.

She uses the wall to stand up unsteadily.

"...Forgive me, my Lady," she says, pressing her forehead to the wall. "Gods. I should never have come here... a temple to the moon-witch."

You had forgotten that a temple of Selûne would be unholy ground to a cleric of Shar. Shadowheart is surrounded by crumbling symbols of her goddess' antithesis. no wonder she's in pain.

Shadowheart steps back from the wall. She re-adjusts her braid.

"Shadowheart," you say, "What are you going to do?"

She sighs.

"Go and interrogate Minthara, I suppose. It's mob rule out there," she says. (You don't know if seven people could be considered a 'mob'.) "I can't go anywhere by myself. I'd die. That's clear enough. So... nothing."

That's good. It's convincing. If it's a lie, she's got a grip on it now, and that's what matters.

"Minthara is searching for you," you tell Shadowheart. "She knows who you are. You can't let her see you."

Shadowheart frowns. "Alright," she says, "One moment..."

She closes her eyes.

"Lady, guide me," she murmurs. Illusion-magic weaves over her skin and hair, painting over her appearance in shadows. When the magic dissipates, your eyes see a tiefling with purple hair and dark eyes. Probably one of the tieflings from the Grove, though you don't recognise them.

"I didn't think clerics could do illusions," you say. That makes the ghost of a smile twitch Shadowheart's lips.

"Shar grants me certain privileges," she says. "Alright. Let's go."

"Already? Don't you want to rest a moment?"

"I've had long enough. I told you... it's harmless. Just unpleasant."

With the disguise covering her appearance, you can no longer see how pale her face is, or the sweat in her hair. There's no trace of anything wrong with her. She begins to walk slowly back towards the others, and you follow her, watching her illusionary tail swish in the air.

The goblins have mostly vanished. Evidently, Dror Ragzlin wasn't joking when he sent everyone out searching. Astarion guides you through hallways filled only with thick, dark silence.

Minthara's quarters are separate from the goblins' living space. A purple, spherical scrying-eye patrols the entrance to her chambers alone. At a distance, Gale conjures a bubble of silence around it. Wyll hurls a blast of eldritch energy at it, and it pops like a soap-bubble.

"Here's hoping nobody noticed us on the other end," Gale notes.

Minthara's base of operations is located across a rickety wooden bridge overlooking a dark, jagged chasm. A liberal smattering of corpses impaled on stalagmites tells you why Minthara has chosen this particular architectural feature to make camp next to. A wooden desk overlooks the shadows, a chest balanced on top of it, out-of-place.

"Looks like she's not here," says Karlach.

"We might as well search her desk while she's out," says Gale. "Astarion, could you get that chest open?"

"Do you *need* to ask?"

Gale and Astarion walk towards the bridge as Karlach pokes through what seem to be Minthara's supplies. Bags and equipment made of Menzoberranzan spider-silk, though all of the spider symbols etched into the metal have been carefully filed away.

"Someone defied Lloth," says Shadowheart, "Probably by paying tribute to the Absolute instead of her. Lloth doesn't like to share."

"But where did she *go*?" says Karlach, squinting at a pile of books written in Undercommon.

Gale and Astarion begin to cross the bridge.

Here's a bit of wisdom from Menzoberranzan:

When you are ambushing a group of people, the most effective way to start is by disabling any spellcasters, in order of most to least delicate. This is because most spellcasters spend too much time learning spells and not enough time learning hand-to-hand combat, and you can only cast spells as long as you are conscious. Once you've rendered the casters useless, you are free to beat the fighters to death at your leisure without being hindered by any pesky spells.

Of course, as they say in Menzoberranzan, the only good wizard is a dead wizard.

A burning arrow flies from the shadows of the chamber's high, cavernous ceiling and ignites one of the fraying ropes holding the bridge aloft. The bridge collapses. Gale screams, only for the scream to be cut short by the choked, gurgling sound of something piercing his lungs. You don't hear Astarion make a sound.

You don't have time to process any of this before Minthara's mace slams into you from behind.

A second piece of wisdom from Menzoberranzan is that, if you can't *kill* a spellcaster, the next best method is to stop them speaking or gesturing, greatly reducing their capability to do magic. A quick and easy way to do this is to cut out their tongue, or, in a pinch, break their jaw and fingers.

Minthara has impeccable technique. She aims her strike at precisely the right spot on your temple to send you reeling, trips you over, and stamps her armoured boot onto your outflung right hand, crushing your fingers beneath. She grinds them into the dirt as she rears back, aims, and crunches her mace into your teeth.

"Now!" she screams. "Cut the intruders to pieces!"

You hear an explosion of noise from above you, where a series of ancient walkways and wooden plank rafters line the cavernous ceiling. The darkness explodes with goblin raiders, raining from above with their blades gleaming.

There is no time to make sense of your pain. Minthara has destroyed the bottom half of your face, one hand. Put them aside. You have no music, but the roaring of the goblins is a little like song. Isn't it? You can hear Gale struggling to call out, impaled on the walls of the chasm. you can hear arrows piercing through Astarion's flesh like quavers of sheet music. Karlach roars, her engine screaming with her, and lunges for Minthara. Minthara screams back, words of magic that force Karlach to her knees, where goblins start piling in on her with scimitars. Then the goblins with scimitars see *you*.

Things get pretty blurry after that.

When you're losing blood, bardic training can do nothing for the ringing in your ears. Your vision is going dark. The separation of soul and body is like a percussive explosion; someone familiar dies, although you can't hear who, through the music.

The music...

Minthara beats Lae'zel down as glistening arrows protrude from the gaps in her armour. Wyll calls for Shadowheart, but she's not there; she's vanished into the shadows, hiding from you using the same magic that shielded you before. Another death, this one close to you, the cleave rattling your bones. By the time the third one comes you can barely hear anything else; you feel your tadpole panic in their wake, trembling in the sound. To have a stranger die nearby is nothing; to have someone you *know* die fills you with terrible power, but you have no music to channel it with, nothing whatsoever.

Nobody bothers to finish you off once you fall. The small rodent inside you has you frantically play dead, in the hopes that nobody will notice you're still breathing. But that hope is dashed when the fighting dies down and an armoured hand wraps around your neck and picks you up by the throat.

Minthara holds you up and glares. She has steely grey skin and a severe brow, and she stares at you with disgust, like you're a drowned rat she just picked out of the compost-heap.

"Where is it?" she snarls.

You can't answer anything except *aaaauughh*, and that sends an explosion of pain through you. You see Minthara's lips twitch, like she's fighting off a bloodthirsty grin.

You can't stop her as she sends her psionic tendrils into you, finding the Absolute-shaped void, the raw wound that the artefact left behind. She tears apart the skin of your thoughts and peels back what you learned about Halsin, about the druids. She rips into your memory of Shadowheart, closing her fingers around the artefact. She sees Shadowheart running to the only safe place, and the only safe place is...

"The Grove," snarls Minthara, and raises her voice to bark at the goblins. "The druids have made me their enemy. For that, they will pay."

When Minthara is done drinking out of you – drained your knowledge of your companions, of their deaths occurring nearby, your memories of the Nautiloid – she juts her chin and cuts the connection off in an instant.

"If you thought I would let you creep in here and squirm away again, you have severely underestimated the Absolute." Minthara's voice is clipped and sharp, and pierces through the mug of pain and magic surrounding your senses. "Did you think me a fool, you pathetic little mongrel?"

You gasp, choking, blood pouring down your lips. Minthara *does* smile, very slightly, a cold grin touching her lips as you struggle to beg for your life.

With just one hand she effortlessly lifts you over the chasm, your limbs limp and heavy.

"I *will* find that weapon." Minthara squeezes her armoured hand more tightly around your neck, closing your airway. "No matter where you hide, I will find you. Remember my face in your final moments, insect; crossing me is the last mistake you will ever make."

You have nothing left. you can only gurgle. There will be no last words.

"Now," says Minthara, as though you were a sack in need of throwing out, and drops you down the chasm.

Your vision is black. But the pain of the spikes impaling you – one through your leg, two through your torso – still burns, nonetheless.

The sounds of Minthara and the goblins leaving you to die fades away. You are left in a cold, empty darkness.

Chapter 12

The fire crackles in its grate, filling the otherwise silent room with a warm comfortable air. The paintings on the wall are hard to see in the dim light; noblemen in fine clothes, painted in elaborate oils. The table is carved from expensive wood – mahogany, or ironwood, something exotic and varnished – and laden with food. The chandelier is crystal, and twinkles with firelight.

Your seat is velvet-lined and well-sized for your small body, which is good, because you're dying in it.

It's just you and the bodies. There are six other seats at the dining table, and each except one is occupied by a different corpse. Gale, jagged holes torn open in his body. Karlach, her engine dead and silent, soaked in her own gore. Wyll, Astarion, and Lae'zel, lifeless, meatlike. You feel bloated and heavy. Their dead souls cling to yours like barnacles to the underside of a boat.

You're not looking pretty, yourself. You're shattered. You are not sitting on the chair so much as you are scattered across it. Pain is wracking you in places and ways that make you sick to think about.

Standing at the head of the table, in front of the fireplace, is a human man. He's finely-dressed and handsome, his long dark hair combed back from his forehead, and he waits for you to wake up with a patient smile.

"What an unexpected turn of events," says the man. "You've met with a terrible fate, haven't you, my dear?"

He spreads his hands, indicating the dead bodies seated on either side of you.

"The mystery of the Absolute, left unsolved. Your companions, dead. Your adventure comes to an inglorious end at the bottom of a deep pit, and the world would be none the wiser for it."

He paces slowly, his manner calculatedly relaxed. There's something slick and oily about the man's handsomeness. Charisma drips from his movements and oozes through the cracks in his words.

"And the one person who can save them, the singular canary that might guide them safely from the mine, is left bleeding to death in the dark... with salvation lying just out of reach. Ah, but here we are. How does that old rhyme go?

The cat brought the mouse to its house for tea.

The mouse ate its fill, then waited to flee.

The mouse smiled brightly: it outfoxed the cat!

Then down came the claw, and that, love, was that.

They *do* know how to write them in Cormyr, don't they? Not that any humble Cormyrian poet could ever compare to the legendary Sunrise Tavernsong."

You finally break then; for the first time in your treacherous adventure you start to cry. Terror and grief crash through you. Every movement hurts, and still you can do nothing but sob.

You've lost so much. There's a parasite killing you. You barely recognise yourself. You cannot wipe your face with your broken hands.

You cry for the uncomplicated death at the bottom of the spikes, the one you will never get to have.

"Let me die," you sob.

"Oh, Eve," sighs the man, his brow creasing in a too-perfect performance of grief. "Why *ever* would I do a thing like that?"

Power screams from him in streams of music you can't even begin to pick apart. There is only ever one thing a being like this would want from you.

"I won't give you anything," you weep, "I won't give you the Song. Leave me alone!"

"You misunderstand!" says the man. "The entire piece? My price is nothing so steep. A paltry bit of healing magic in return for your mother's heavenly voice? Well, I say *heavenly*..."

He paces the room slowly. He is elegant, well-poised, not entirely realistic. He moves like an actor on a world-sized stage.

You are in so much pain, more pain than anyone is supposed to ever go through and live.

"One verse," says the man. "I'd have you sign for it, but I think a verbal contract is the most elegant form of law – don't you?"

The music in your head is ominous and overpowering.

"One verse," he repeats. "Any one at all."

One verse. There are hundreds. Some are more powerful than others. One verse for the end of your torment.

"Fine," you weep, "Fine, damn you!"

The man crosses the room slowly, watching you moan and weep in your chair. When he reaches out a hand to brush your hair from your face, his skin is hot, as though feverish.

He touches your forehead and lucidity hits you like a knife between the shoulderblades. Bones and tendons snap back into place and knot into form. Your body agonisingly rearranges itself into the correct shape as you scream. Splatters of your blood are drying on the polished wooden table.

You writhe. You whimper. The man watches you intently, as though drinking in every detail of your humiliation.

When you can finally look up again, the man is watching you with a plaster replica of a loving smile.

...Pull yourself together, Eve. We move forward, or we're finished.

You rub your face with your sleeves. They aren't clean. None of you is clean. Even your soul is grimy, here.

"Where is this?" you say. "Who are you?"

That makes the man laugh. There is something about that laugh, much like the high cheekbones and sculpted chin, that is both viscerally beautiful and viscerally terrifying.

"Ah, where are my manners! This is the House of Hope, where the weary come to rest, and the hungry to feast." The man gives you an elegant bow. "I am the master of the house, Raphael. Very much at your service."

It might be more accurate to say the furniture is, much like Raphael, is too good to be true. The entire House of Hope rings with insincerity, from the food on the table to the fire roaring with unnatural ferocity in the grate. There's a familiar sulphurous taste in your mouth.

"Ordinarily, I would introduce myself as your saviour," says Raphael. "But in these exceptional circumstances... Oh, why don't we say I'm a friend of the family?"

He snaps his elegant fingers.

Small, darting wisps of flame dance in the air around him as he unfurls his wings. His human form melts away to reveal the red skin and four-pronged horns underneath, his eyes yellow and oily black. Where Mizora inspired terror, the feeling tugging your stomach now is far more seductive, the cozy just-not-burning heat of a candle in cupped hands.

You stare, because you don't think you have a choice.

Raphael, Prince of Hell, smiles. His smile is much more believable with a set of predator's pointed teeth behind it.

"I believe my line is: What's better than a devil you don't know?" Raphael spreads his clawed hands. "A devil you *do*."

"You can't take my soul," you say. "It's mine. I – I solemnly swear it." You can't make yourself deliver it well enough; it falls flat. The House of Hope is a performance, and you don't know any of the cues. You are utterly powerless here.

Raphael laughs. "Oh, I wasn't planning on asking for your soul, my dear! I am nothing if not humble; a verse of your mother's *loveliest* work is more than enough of a payment for a patron of the arts such as myself."

You flounder. You flop. "You didn't say – one verse of *what* – "

The flames in Raphael's eyes dance with delight.

"If I wanted to play *that* particular game, my dear girl, I'd have saved your little brother's life, and not yours," he says. "His soul is here, you know – in the Hells. Would you like the details of his eternal torment left to your imagination? Or would you care to witness his final moments in *fiendish detail*?"

"No!" you plead, because you can't help it. Raphael's melodious presence pulls at the strings of your heart, muddling your thoughts. The tadpole is still, its influence flattened by Raphael's presence. He doesn't need to bat an eyelid. Raphael makes all of your weaknesses rise to the surface. "No – please – "

Raphael's air of sticky sweetness never waivers. He smiles more widely.

"Good girl," he says. "I look forward to watching your progress, you know. The humble school matron with a mysterious past... the *good* Tavernsong. An unlikely edition to the Coast's presently most *interesting* adventuring party. Are they stumbling down the road to salvation, or the road to damnation?"

He acts out a shrug.

"Who can say, in a tale as twisted as yours? After all, the game has changed this time." Raphael spreads his hands. "The stakes are higher than ever. The universe has its eyes on us... and *you*, I suppose."

Despite yourself, you say, "I don't understand..."

"No, you don't." He laughs. "Put it out of your mind! For now, your life is yours. Bring back your friends. Search for a cure for that parasite, if you like. I'd tell you whether or not there was one, but... well, I wouldn't want to *spoil* anything."

Raphael grins. He has too many teeth.

"After all, the *real* mystery has yet to begin," he says. "If I were you, my dear, I'd read that Bhaalspawn file in more detail."

You don't say anything.

"Time for your performance, then," says Raphael. "Let me leave you with one final piece of wisdom."

He leans towards you, moving his face closer to yours. He's even taller in his devil form. His thick, fleshy wings loom over you, overshadowing you, like you're a mouse about to be caught by an eagle.

"Let me assure you," says Raphael, "When the time comes for me to take your soul, Eve Tavernsong, I will not *ask*. You will come to me, my dear, and you will *beg* me to take it."

He looks down at you. Glimmering at the back of his eyes, behind the smile, is a deep, beckoning hunger.

"Now," he says, "A verse promised, a verse performed. Then you'll be back on your adventure... until such a time that you need my help again, of course."

He pulls out the table's only empty chair, the one that would contain Shadowheart. You can only hope that Shadowheart escaped the goblins, and in that case, that the world is better for it.

Raphael settles himself down comfortably, his wings shrinking to a more convenient arrangement as he does. It's not quite right to say that a devil can shift form. It would be more accurate to say that a devil can change *appearance*, which is not the same thing. A devil's *true* form is not one a person can usually perceive, and if they *do* see it, it's normally followed by death and insanity. Devils are not very *literal* creatures.

Raphael does not need to be sitting here in his perfect chair, resting his elbow on the table and his chin in his hand, to take the verse from you. Making you nervous must simply be a hobby of his.

"Don't mind me," says Raphael, in the tone of a man who knows perfectly damn well that the listener has no choice but to mind him.

You draw Lihala from your lute-case. The scuffed wood and worn strings are out-of-place in the House of Hope; the lute is very slightly imperfect, in a space that is perfect entirely.

You look around the lavish dining room. Finding no better stage, you push aside a silver platter of roast piglet (as though a devil living in the Nine Hells would ever care to eat anything as mundane as pork) and clamber onto the large, fine dining table. Raphael gives no indication of annoyance as you clumsily knock over goblets and elaborately-set cutlery. You have no idea what here, if anything, is illusionary. It could be nothing, or the entire building.

The five corpses sitting at the table all have their eyes open. Despite the perfect stillness, their glassy, lifeless eyeballs are arranged to suggest that they are looking at you.

Their bodies are dead, but you feel their tadpoles writhing in anticipation.

Only their souls are silent. What would Sunrise Tavernsong say?

A good story can immortalise the dead. All bards understand this...

And good bards understand it well.

And great bards understand it very, very well indeed.

A strange kind of performer's thrill passes through you, when your audience is only the devil and the dead. You swallow.

You sing,

"Let the night pass by,

Sleep will find you, so will I,

Close your eyes and see;

Dance for me, dance for me, dance for me!

Swiftly comes the day,

If you love me, slip away;

Let the monsters be;

Dance for me, dance for me, dance for me!

Take a chance on the night,

For tomorrow, we part;

Live always in moonlight,

Or die in the dark.

Tell me I own you, a thaisce, mo chroi;

Dance for me, dance for me, dance for me!"

Your singing voice has degraded. It's been years since your lessons, since pushing your vocal chords to their limits was your daily prayer, and to your ears the song sounds weak and wheezy. But your performance is close enough, at least, that the music functions how it should.

Oh, the song is so easy to remember. So very, very easy.

Your friends hear the music, and begin to come back.

You hear snapping, crunching.

Power spills from your voice in intoxicating waves, as though your voice were hotter and harder than usual. Your fingers dance on the lute in patterns you're sure you don't recognise. You feel drunk. Souls take an enormous amount of magic to move, no matter which songs are involved, and in the final lines you're so saturated in the Weave you feel it leaking from your pores.

Your mouth is filled with the gritty, earthy taste of necromancy. The pain only comes at the end.

Your vision goes black. Distantly, fuzzily, you feel your face hitting something hard.

Voices. Shouting. And you hear Raphael sigh a deep, satisfied sigh, as though digesting an especially good meal.

You feel yourself falling into a deep sleep.

How long has it been since you slept well?

Flat leather bedrolls, aching limbs. Your bed back home was narrow, but the mattress was stuffed with feathers. Years of matrons past had worn the room into shape long before you arrived. It was the kind of room you were supposed to grow old and retire in.

The sky is a tapestry of rich purples and blues. It's scattered with magical light, formed into stars in places, or patterns of hexagons and lines in others. You are in no pain at all, which is a marvel, considering the circumstances.

You crawl out of the river. It runs through what looks like a floating chunk of overgrown garden, drifting lazily through the bright starry sky.

Your dream guardian is staring up at the impossible sky. She turns slightly as she notices you. She's dressed in gleaming ceremonial armour, delicate gold plating striking against her midnight-coloured skin. Her snowy hair is tied back from her face. She smiles, and when she speaks, her soft, honeyed voice is as beautiful as you remember.

"You did well," she says. "You brought them back. Shadowheart is still in danger, and Minthara is close behind her. But, for now, you're safe. All of you."

You look around, struggling to get your bearings. You're not sure that you should trust any more flawlessly beautiful strangers you wake up in the mysterious presence of. You look around, juggling a disparity of questions. *Where am I? What is this? What just happened?* Pinning down just one question is a struggle. Then you follow her gaze, and see what part of the glowing sky she's staring at.

"What is *that*?" you say.

It looks like the skull of a dead giant, or maybe a god. Great onyx-black bones scatter lazily across the sky, as though floating in honey. Darting between floating islands and shards of bone are humanoid figures and flashing lights.

"A battle for the fate of Faerûn," says the dream guardian, following your gaze. "The Absolute grows ever stronger. Struggles like this, and like the one that occurred between you and the True Souls, are happening all over the Sword Coast. You're not the only victim the cult has created... not by a long shot."

You watch the people battle. Magic crackles and wavers in the air, but it's not much different; everything here looks magical to you. They're just long-limbed forms, like tin soldiers, at this distance.

"You saved us from the ship," you say. "The others heard your voice."

"I needed your help," she says. "I still do. The Absolute can still be stopped, and you need to find a cure before it's too late. As it stands, we have the same goal."

"What is the Absolute?" you ask.

Her expression hardens. "A disease," she says. "A figurative sickness, threatening to rot our world from the inside out. I'm sorry I can't tell you more, but... I'm not sure it would make sense, even if I could."

You nod. A clear explanation would have been too much to expect. Even while dreaming, you're aware that the Weave is different here; it's raw, close to the surface. But you don't think the dream guardian is using magic. You can't sense anything at all. Whatever brought you here, it was some power outside the realms of normal spellcraft. If magic is what makes this woman seem trustworthy, or beautiful... you can't sense it at all. It reminds you of a sensation, in the blur before Minthara...

"You're the artefact, aren't you?" you say. "Shadowheart said it was alive... and that it wanted to free us from the Absolute."

The dream guardian's gaze is still directed at the battle, but she glances over at you when you say that. "That's very astute," she says, raising her eyebrows. "My intention was to shield Shadowheart for long enough for her to escape, and I extended my protection to the rest of you in order to save her. Now that the connection is established, even at this distance, I can prevent the Absolute from controlling your minds, or causing you to undergo ceremorphosis. For now."

"For now?"

"If it gets stronger, or the artefact falls into their hands, I will no longer be able to help you," she says. "If the Absolute wills it, you would be transformed in an instant. But I don't have any intention of letting that happen."

Dimples appear in her white-freckled cheeks as she smiles at you.

"Who are you?" you ask.

"Another of the Absolute's victims," she answers. "I was an adventurer, once. Like you, I was infected by a mind flayer parasite. Like you, I wish to be free of it."

You look out at the impossible sky. There are more islands, more god-sized bones. More colours than you know how to describe. Your dream guardian is certainly no ordinary elven adventurer, not anymore. For all you know, she could be one of the eldritch beings on the edge of existence, the great old ones only the most twisted warlocks dare to contact. Worse, she could be one of the gods. That would be just your luck. Some of *those* used to be people.

"And even if you could tell me more, I wouldn't understand, I bet," you say.

She laughs a little. "I'm afraid so," she says.

"What is the Bhaalspawn file?" you ask. "Why is it important?"

The question makes her look at you, puzzled.

"I don't know," she says. "What's inside it?"

"I was hoping you could tell me. The devil told me to read it."

"I would imagine he's trying to manipulate you to some end, if he's a devil," she says. "But whether the file has any relevance to you or the Absolute, I don't know."

"There's more," you say. "The skeleton we met, Withers – he told me I was different? That I wasn't supposed to survive."

"He's no mere skeleton." Your guardian's brow creases. "He seems to be a being of great power. But – I don't know what that means either. I'm sorry."

"Oh..."

"Although, for what it may be worth, I don't think your continued survival *was* a mistake," she says. "I rescued you, along with the others. You seem kind-hearted, intelligent... I don't see why anyone would want you dead."

The remark, when it comes from her specifically, makes you blush. She doesn't seem to notice, her gaze directed up at the broken sky.

"Especially that skeleton," she murmurs. "I wonder what his true intentions are?"

"If you don't mind me saying, I was wondering the same thing about you," you say.

Your dream guardian smiles. "I suppose we'll both discover that for ourselves, in due time."

She looks up sharply at the battlefield, as though hearing something.

"What is it?" you say.

"Ah... They need me. I can't stay much longer," she says. "It was good to speak to you like this, Eve."

"Wait—" You can feel wakefulness coming towards you, rising. "What do I do? How do I help you?"

She smiles. "You're already doing more than enough," she says. "Follow the trail of the Absolute. Keep your companions alive. Embrace your potential to the fullest."

She waves a hand. You feel the water rising underneath you. The sky spins.

"Good luck," she says, as the world starts to fade. "I'll be in touch."

Jostling. Rocking. Bursts of pain, bursts of nausea.

You spend a while just drifting in and out of sleep. Someone, at some point, picks you up and carries you. Every time you begin to approach waking, the lack of magic left in your body sends you back into sleep.

You know when you're awake for *real* because you feel fucking awful.

Pushing your body to its limits physically usually results in some predictable discomfort. Pushing it to its *magical* limits is another ball game. You feel like you have two hangovers simultaneously.

You wake up lying somewhere dark and hard. Even in the darkness, lying down with just cold dirt on the ground and silence around you, your brain shouts that it's too bright and too loud. Your body stings with the stiff, fresh pain of inelegantly-applied healing magic. Raphael brought you from the brink *hard*, leaving phantom pains all over your torso and limbs.

You cough. There's an iron taste at the back of your throat. You splutter, "Moradin's *nuts*," and your voice is hoarse and feeble.

Your eyes begin to adjust to the gloom. Still in the temple, with a light coming from around a corner.

You realise you're not alone when Astarion, sitting just outside of your line of sight in the shadows, says, "What in the hells did you do?"

You sigh. If you awake in the presence of *another* mysterious, seductive figure, they're going to have to start forming queues.

Sleep is calling to you again, blurring your vision.

"No, no, no fainting your way out of *that* question!" He crosses the room. You know Astarion is moving with urgency because you hear him do it, which you usually don't.

You prepare for Astarion to hit you – you *would* be brought back from near-death by a devil only to be ingloriously murdered by a vampire – but he has the decency instead to take his long-nailed fingers and sharply flick you in the nose.

"Ow!"

"Out with it," Astarion demands, "Who is Raphael, how in the hells did you contact him?"

"Hello, Eve, I am so glad to be alive," you complain. "Please feel free to lie in silence for three or four minutes and recover, on account of my being so grateful to be alive."

"Oh, really! Well, if we're swapping grievances, my shirt is absolutely *ruined*," he gestures to the large holes and bloodstains covering his clothes, "Because, and this is the part I'm a little fuzzy on, I fell off a bridge and was *impaled to death*! Now, *talk*!"

You rub your eyes and sit up, stiffly, letting yourself adjust to the gloom. You vaguely recognise the secret rooms behind the bedroom of Priestess Gut. Someone must have carried you here and laid you on the stone floor.

"He's the one who found me," you say. "I got the impression he's been watching us."

Astarion scoffs. "Of course," he says, "Why wouldn't a devil start following us? It doesn't make any less sense than anything *else* that's happened. So, what did you give him? Your soul?"

He says it very casually, as though the current safety of your soul is of no importance whatsoever.

"No," you say, "He wanted me to sing for him."

"Mm-hm. And you sang, did you?"

Astarion must know that *something* happened, because he doesn't sound surprised at all.

"Yes," you sigh. "I used healing magic to sing you all back to life."

"Ah. I *see*."

He says this as though it confirms something. You begin to wonder what he remembers. It's hard to concentrate on everything at once. you have to keep *these* secrets for Astarion, *those* secrets for Shadowheart... No, wait...

"What happened to the others?" you say.

Astarion's expression shifts slightly.

"They're *alive*," he says slowly.

"Are they okay?"

The expression shifts again. "Y-es," says Astarion. "But..."

There's a set of approaching footsteps. The light around the corner brightens as Lae'zel, holding a torch in one hand and with her armour doffed, looks into the room.

"She's awake," says Lae'zel. She sets the torch into one of the empty sconces on the wall.

You glance over at Astarion only to see to your horror that a large grin has appeared on his face.

Lae'zel hurries over to you and kneels.

"You healed us," says Lae'zel. "We met the devil you dealt with."

"Um, yes," you say. "I – "

"Your diminutive size and seemingly hollow mind conceal a warrior's heart," growls Lae'zel. "I did not realise until now that enchantment and trickery too are weapons. I cannot stand to see a rival on the battlefield master that which I cannot – enough! I want to face you in combat and push your body till it comes close to breaking. I want to see the sweat of battle on your skin, and taste it."

It takes you a few seconds.

"Taste?" you repeat.

The look in Lae'zel's eyes is not the usual one. It is... strangely intense.

"Lae'zel," calls Gale, following her into the room. All of them are dishevelled and bruised-looking. your healing magic has evidently gotten rusty. "Give her some space. Whatever feat of magic you did, Eve, it was high above your usual level – no easy feat. How do you feel?"

There's something in the way that Gale is looking at you. He looks... unfocused. Hazy. As though distracted.

"Fine," you say warily. "How do *you* feel?"

"Oh, I can't complain. Alive. Healthy, relatively." You are almost reassured. Then he adds, "Did you know you have the voice of an angel?"

"Astarion," you say.

Karlach and Wyll come around the corner, see you, and light up. They're happy to see you. They're *very* happy to see you.

Karlach lies down next to you, on her side, one hand on her hips, the other propping up her chin. Wyll kneels on the ground next to her.

"Hi," says Karlach.

"Hi," says Wyll.

"*Astarion*," you say unhappily, "What is going on?"

Astarion is pretending to examine his nails. "You tell me," he says, "*I* didn't pump them full of enough glamour to seduce a dragon."

"Huh? What?"

"No need to worry," says Karlach. "I feel good. I feel *great*."

"You did an incredible job," says Wyll, staring deeply at you. "I felt it. I *heard* it."

"I thought if I left them out in the corridor they'd hump it out like rabbits," says Astarion. "I'm impressed they're still going. How long are you planning on keeping this up?"

"I'm not!" you protest. "How do I stop it?"

He shrugs. "It's *your* magic. Turn it off."

"I don't know how!" you wail.

"Oh, well, that seems like an inconvenient and hilarious problem for you to deal with." Astarion waves a hand dismissively. "Good luck!"

They're all staring at you with magically-charged infatuation. If you don't do something, they're going to start falling in love, either with you or each other, which is a life complication that you really don't need right now.

In desperation, you say, "Gale, if I had charmed a group of people, what would be the easiest way to cure them?"

"Attack them or cause them physical pain," Gale answers promptly.

You wail, "I don't know how to do that either!"

"Shall I bite someone? It wouldn't be any trouble," suggests Astarion.

You put your face in your hands.

"Wyll," you say.

"Yes?"

"Touch Karlach's shoulder."

You wait until you hear him hiss, "Ow!"

"Wyll, pinch Gale," you say, face covered.

In this manner you get everyone un-charmed. Everyone begins to leave you alone, through a haze of strong collective embarrassment. Nobody wants to look at you after the charm is broken, except Astarion, who is watching the proceedings with obvious relish. Whether or not he resisted the charm because he's an elf, a vampire or a misanthropic bastard isn't clear.

You curl up on the floor, so as to better feel sorry for yourself. You decide in advance that nobody will be able to convince you to move, for a minimum of hours but maybe for the rest of your life if you really try.

Evening Tavernsong, daughter of Sunrise Tavernsong, indeed! You feel like dissolving into goo.

Nobody even attempts to shift you. Eventually they move their things and set up a makeshift campsite around you. Karlach drags over one of the large metal braziers and lights it by holding the logs in her hands till they start to smoke. After a blissful number of minutes pretending you're invisible, Wyll unrolls your uncomfortable bedroll next to you. Thankfully, nobody helps you as you inch your way towards it in the dirt. This is your last little speck of dignity.

Lae'zel goes to pace the doorway. The others sit around the fire. Their clothes are ragged and bloodied, and their bodies don't look much better. Heat glows from both the brazier and Karlach's chest, which makes unhealthy sputtering noises as she hunches over and puts her chin in her hands.

"Now what?" says Karlach.

No-one says anything.

Lae'zel walks back over. Her armour, discarded on the ground, is stained and battered, and her exposed thin arms are lined with bruises and scars, old and new.

"I suppose if Shadowheart escapes, then we'll keep our sanity, and we can travel to the crèche to ask the githyanki for help," says Gale.

"And if Shadowheart gets caught by Minthara?" says Karlach.

Gale shrugs. "Who can say?" he says. "It's up to Tymora now."

"I've never cared for Lady Luck," mutters Astarion. "She's never done much for me."

Gale flexes his wrist and conjures a blue, glowing spectral hand, which he flicks towards the brazier. The hand adjusts the logs in the fire.

Karlach grunts.

"That's a bit shit," she says.

"Yes," says Gale mildly. "It is, a bit."

"It's no use," says Wyll, staring blankly into the flames. "Even if we could find Minthara and her forces before they destroy the Grove, there's nothing we can do to stop her, like this. We don't even have a chance of escaping this camp without resting first."

The fire is smoking, burning unsteadily – more realistic than the one at Raphael's, certainly.

You're nearly drifting off. You're so tired, you feel like you're half-asleep already.

The time passes in heavy, exhausted silence.

"Well," says Gale. "I think there's the last of the bread rolls."

Lae'zel has been scowling since your glamour wore off, and she gives a hateful little scoff at this. "Do you ever think of anything except your stomach?" she spits.

Gale shrugs. "We might as well eat," he says. "While we're still alive to do so."

He begins to rustle around his pack. You manage to arrange yourself so that you're lying on your side, watching your companions through blurry eyes.

Wyll hands Gale a wrapped bundle. Gale unearths a folding adventurer's-pan, the shapeless metal pot that merchants claim can be used to cook anything under any circumstances, provided the chef has no expectations for the results aside from 'edible'.

Gale coughs, waves his hand listlessly, and mutters something so magically illegible it almost doesn't catch the Weave right. The smoking, just-lit fire suddenly blazes, increasing in intensity, creating a little puff of sparks as it does.

"What are you doing?" Lae'zel demands.

"I still have a jar of fat from last night," says Gale. "If we're going to eat, it might as well be hot."

Lae'zel kicks the nearest piece of luggage.

"Vlaakith'ka sivim hrath krash'ht," she mutters darkly. "Is this to be my end? Defeated, humiliated, the last of my days spent wasting time on pointless *istik* rituals of cooking food we *don't need?*"

"Well, I won't make you one if you don't want it," says Gale.

Lae'zel grunts. Gale begins tearing the last of the bread into hunks, nonplussed. He uses Wyll's Adventurer's Guild Issue All-Purpose Wooden Implement to spoon a blob of pork fat onto the pan, which sizzles. he holds the pan over the flames, concentrates for a moment, then lets go, leaving it suspended floating above the flames, his spectral hand holding it aloft at the bottom.

The hot bacon smell of melting pork fat fills the air. You see the willpower withering in Lae'zel's eyes.

You close your eyes, listening to the hiss of cooking and shifting flame.

Shadowheart might be able to survive, if she hides out for the Grove's destruction. The goblins will kill all of the refugees, but they probably won't be able to survive a battle against the druids. With luck, they'll all kill each other, and... Then...

Then what? You're so tired, and surviving has taken so much effort already. Your exhausted mind slides off the problem like it's oil on grease paper.

You don't feel like any time passes, but your eyes snap open and Karlach is waving a piece of fried bread under your nose.

You shake your head. "Not hungry," you mumble.

"Eve," says Gale, "You restored five adults from death."

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Be that as it may," he says patiently, "It probably took a lot of energy."

You take a reluctant bite of hot, oily toast. Your tastebuds, ravenous, rejoice. your stomach churns nauseously in rebellion. It isn't a good feeling.

"As my mentor once told me: a spellcaster is only as good as his last good meal. Besides, who knows when we'll eat again," says Gale. "I suppose feeding us will be the job of the Absolute, soon enough."

"Let's not think about that," you mutter.

Gale says nothing as he hands a hunk of bread to Lae'zel, and Lae'zel says nothing as she bites into it. Astarion doesn't eat. He leans, his back to the wall and his arms crossed, watching.

Could be better, could be worse, as last meals go.

"Who wants to go first?" says Karlach.

"First at what?" says Wyll.

"Spilling the beans. You know, like how Shadowheart turned out to be a Sharran who stole a thing from the gith," she says. "Sharing our secrets. Which we obviously have. Who wants to go first?"

"Oh," says Wyll.

"Hm," says Gale.

"You first," says Astarion.

Karlach pops the last of her food into her mouth and chews.

"Zariel sent a load of paladins to kill me and I don't know where they are," she says promptly.

"Oh, that's – not at all as big as I thought it would be," says Wyll. "Or as – secretive."

"Why?" She wrinkles her nose in amusement. "Is yours worse?"

Wyll barks a short laugh.

"Yes, why not? My father's Grand Duke Ulder Ravengard," he says.

Astarion straightens up, suddenly interested. Karlach's eyebrows raise. So do yours.

You say, "Do you think he..."

"He might be the man who the goblins captured? Perhaps," says Wyll. "It could've been Galdon Shattershield. Not to be callous, but I *hope* it was him, and not my father. For the sake of the city, at least."

"...Sorry," says Gale, "Who is Ulder Ravengard?"

"A Baldurian politician," you say. "And the Grand Marshall of the Flaming Fist, the city's militia."

"A champion of the people," says Wyll. "Beloved among all the strata of society in Baldur's Gate, from the rich to the destitute."

"Uh. Well. I've heard he's... alright," says Karlach. "For a copper, anyway. He's your dad? I didn't think he had a family."

"He's unmarried," says Wyll. "My mother died not long after my birth. I'm an only child, too."

"You grew up posh, then?" says Karlach.

"I wouldn't say *posh*," says Wyll. "My father was *rich*. There's a difference. He didn't come from money, and he taught me the value of a day's work, a sharp blade and a gold piece... but, yes, I was taken to plenty of palace dinners and courtly dances, when I was young."

"And how does *this* meal compare to a palace dinner?" says Gale wryly.

"I'd take your cooking over one of those royal feasts any day, Gale," says Wyll. He grins. "Although the dancing leaves much to be desired."

Karlach snorts. "Show us a few dance moves then," she says.

"Maybe later," says Wyll. "If we get out of here alive."

"*When* we get out of here alive, soldier," says Karlach.

"*When!*" repeats Wyll. "When we escape the clutches of the Absolute, we will dance and drink like champions, all of us. I'd drink to that, if I had a drink."

"You could propose..." Gale holds aloft his hunk of stale, lightly fried bread. "A toast."

Lae'zel, abruptly, stands up. She dusts the crumbs from her clothes.

She walks to the doorway.

She vanishes from sight.

Wyll makes a faint wheezing sound. You look at him, concerned that he has suddenly contracted a rare and unusual disease and is dying. He has not. He is laughing.

"Toast," he wheezes.

"Because this is bread," Gale explains to you, "And when you cook bread..."

"Yes, I understood," you say. You consider smiling for his benefit. You decide against it.

Wyll doubles over. He slaps Gale on the shoulder. Gale beams.

"This is it," says Astarion, from the wall. "I'm either going to die here for good with only you five idiots for company, or I already *have* died, and *this*, for my sins, is my eternal torture."

"You have died," you say, "You're a vampire."

Astarion pushes himself off the wall. He saunters over, plucks the half-eaten piece of bread out of your fingers, and eats it.

"Hey," you protest.

"Your turn," says Astarion. "I know how resurrection works. If you'd healed us the normal way, it would have cost you several thousand gold in diamonds. That's not exactly within the normal means of a simple school matron."

"I was not a *simple* school matron," you say, affronted. "I went to *Provoss*, you know."

"Where?" says Gale.

"A very prestigious ladies' boarding school in the Upper City. Anyway, my mother tried to turn herself into a lich," you say.

Wyll chokes, splutters, and starts to cough. Gale's eyes widen in mute horror. Some wizards are nervous to even *hear* the L-word.

"A lich?" says Karlach. "What, like an immortal person-eating skeleton wizard?"

"Yes," you say.

"Your mum's a skeleton?"

"No – I mean, yes, *now*, she is," you say. "A *normal* skeleton. She wasn't a lich, she was just a woman who tried to become one and died in the process."

Karlach puffs out her cheeks. "Damn," she says. "What happened?"

"Well, she murdered a couple of people – "

"Murdered!" exclaims Gale.

" – and the Harpers hired an adventuring party to come around and kill her."

"Your mother was a lich!" exclaims Gale.

"No, my mother was definitely mortal. She was just a criminal with a bounty, in the end. It was a paladin that did it," you say. "They snuck into our basement at night and hit her with a warhammer."

"Good *grief*!"

"What happened to you?" asks Karlach.

"Well, they sent me to live with my father," you say. "I didn't get in trouble for helping her, or anything. I was only fourteen."

Gale shakes his head.

"But that's... I mean, that's... but... lichens are *wizards*," says Gale. "Sunrise Tavernsong was a...I mean, even if you *could* make a lichnee potion, then you'd still need to...in order to maintain it...there's no such thing as a *bard lich*. Is there?"

"There isn't," you say.

"So..."

"She called it a *Lichsinger*. It was all theoretical. Never got past the songwriting stage," you say. "I don't really remember the details—"

"You don't?" says Astarion, with obvious disappointment.

"But it involved the creation of a Lichnee-song, which is for trapping souls inside," you say, "Which I know a part of, which I used it to bring you back to life, which is not something I care to do, generally, so I'd like it if everyone didn't die again, please. Any more questions?"

Gale exclaims, "Yes! Many!"

"Who did she kill?" says Astarion.

"Um," you say. "Random criminals we found, mostly."

"Mmm. *Criminals*, I'm sure. Baldur's Gate is teeming with easy-to-murder nobodies." Astarion smirks. "And just as many murderers."

Gale runs his hands through his hair. "Eve, when you say *we*... you don't mean..."

"My mother didn't make me kill anyone," you clarify. "She did all of the actual *murdering*. I just helped lure them, mainly."

"Oh, that's worse," Gale groans. "That's awful. That is just *ghastly*. Gods."

"And there I was worrying you'd judge me for being a vampire spawn," remarks Astarion. "How many people did you murder?"

"Six. You?"

"Oh, hundreds."

Gale puts his head in his hands.

"But, if you were fourteen when she died," says Karlach, "And you're a halfling, as well... You must have been..."

"Pretty young, yes," you say. "Noonan was nine."

Karlach shakes her head.

"She taught you both?" says Gale.

You shrug. "I think she wanted us to follow in her footsteps," you say.

"How much do you know?"

"Uh," you say. "I don't know. Most of it, but not the hardest parts. It wasn't finished."

Gale's horror seems to be finally giving way to curiosity. He takes out his quill. "So, this Lichnee-song," he says, "How did it work? The process of transforming into and staying a lich, it's incredibly complicated..."

"It *is* complicated," you say. "It's not the kind of song you can just *sing*. There are parts you can only sing if you know certain languages, or have to be performed in a group, or in other planes of existence. I don't know how it worked," you add hastily, seeing a look of a bit *too* much intrigue appear in Gale's eyes. "My mother spent decades writing it, and she only involved me right before it was complete."

"Could *you* become a lich?" says Astarion.

"No," you say. "Even if I didn't mind killing people, I couldn't afford the cost."

"What do you mean, the cost? Do you have to give up something in the process?" says Gale.

You give him a look. "The money cost," you say. "Magic is expensive. At least on *my* salary. Even if I know all the words and I learned all the magic I needed, I'd have no way to pay for the materials or labour."

Astarion scoffs. "That's it? You've not pursued lichdom because you don't *earn enough gold*? *That's* what's holding you back from eternal life?"

"It's enough for most people," you point out.

Gale shakes his head. "But you *could*," he says. "You remember the method. You could become the first bard lich – the first Lichsinger."

You have a hell of a headache, and you don't have the energy to respond politely. "That was what my brother said before he went off to Elturel and died," you say. "Now I'm the only one left who remembers. And when I die, there'll be nobody. And I'd like to die. If it's tonight, it's tonight. That's what I think of that."

Gale's eyes flit away from yours. He rubs his beard uncomfortably.

"You'll still remember the words if you turn into a mind flayer," says Astarion.

You shake your head. "It won't matter," you say. "You need a soul to do bardic magic. And make art," you add, "That's why they have thralls, you know. Mind flayers don't have any souls."

Astarion shrugs. "Hmph. Shame."

Wyll, across the campfire, has been sitting very still. He has his fingertips pressed together and his eyes on the flames.

"Why did she do it?" says Wyll.

"What, try to become a lich? I've often wondered," you say. "I've thought about it a fair bit, over the years."

"And what do you think?" says Wyll.

"What I think is, I think she probably wanted to live forever more than she minded murdering people."

"You've got to have more thoughts than *that*," says Karlach.

"Like what?" you say.

She frowns. "Well, I don't know," she says. "You don't seem very... bothered about it? You talk about it like it's normal."

"Isn't it?" you say. "Terrible things happen in Baldur's Gate every day."

"Hah! Worse than you can imagine." Astarion sits down at the campfire, languid. "The Harpers have barely even scratched the surface. Sarevok was right – it's murderers all the way down."

"There you go," you say. "Some of those murderers have children."

Astarion rests his head on his hand and says, "Have *you* murdered anyone?"

"We've all killed people," you point out. "We met killing goblins. In fact, we were all killed in combat ourselves, just now."

"We're adventurers – killing is in the name. Murder is something else." Astarion grins wolfishly. "Cold-blooded, premeditated, entirely avoidable *murder*. That's an art of its own."

"Well, *I've* never been interested in murdering people," you declare.

Karlach shoots you a languid thumbs-up of approval.

"Lord," says Gale, rubbing his eyes. "I'm a long way from Waterdeep."

Wyll pats him on the shoulder.

"I think I'd do the same thing," says Karlach. "If I was you. Get a job and keep my head down."

"That was the plan," you say.

"There's still time," says Wyll.

"Let's not talk about the future," you say. "Come on. Astarion, secrets?"

"Die," he says cheerfully.

"Gale?"

"Hmm. *My* big secret is best left until another time," says Gale. "...Or never, under the circumstances."

"Come *on*, now I *definitely* want to know it," says Karlach.

"What about that little grey bag Withers gave you?" you say.

Gale clears his throat.

"Ah," he says. "Yes. Quite."

"The Bag of Holding?" says Astarion.

"Hm," says Gale.

"The one you secretly kept for yourself without telling us what it was? *That* Bag of Holding?"

"Fine words from the man who stole it, Astarion," you say.

"I'm a rogue! Stealing things is my prerogative. Surely you, with your big brilliant brain, know how much a Bag of Holding is worth?" says Astarion. "It's a *bottomless, weightless bag*. I wasn't going to take the risk that you'd gobble it down like that necklace – we can use this to make a living."

"*How?*" says Gale, to which Astarion responds: "Ugh. Wizards."

"I hate to say it, but Astarion has a point," says Wyll. "Why the secrecy? If you were hungry—"

"I prefer to think of it as the *affliction* being hungry, not *me*, thank you." Gale huffs. "You make it sound like I eat shoes."

Astarion shrugs. "So? *Was* there a reason, or were you just suffering from a little self-consciousness about your diet?"

Gale coughs.

"I assumed the object was given to me specifically because my condition was getting slightly advanced," says Gale, "So I – ah – was trying to be discreet. If I don't consume something at least every few days, there are some unpleasant consequences."

"Like what?" says Karlach.

"...Well, for example, I find it very difficult to concentrate, and..."

"A Bag of Holding just so you can *concentrate*?" splutters Astarion.

"That's how it starts—"

"You couldn't have just bloody *put up with it* for a bit?" Astarion takes the Bag of Holding from his pockets and waves it around, for emphasis. "If you'd given me this, I could've stolen you as many magic items as you can eat!"

"You could've done that anyway," Karlach points out. "You've had the bag this whole time."

"Look, I'm not making any judgments about who gave who what," Astarion waves a hand dismissively, "The point is, *Gale of Waterdeep*, that as your gophers you at *least* owe us an explanation for assuming ownership of any magical items we come across."

"Yes, Gale, at least Astarion asked me before he drank my blood," you say. "I would be deeply troubled and disturbed, if Astarion had bitten me without asking."

Astarion manages to smile at you in a way that is somehow purely hateful.

Gale sighs. "More lives than mine are at stake," he says. "I would try harder not to consume anything if it weren't important that I do so regularly. Truly."

"Why?" presses Astarion. "What would happen?"

Gale doesn't want to answer the question, and you can see behind his eyes that his mind is wildly searching for a way to avoid it.

"I weigh Gale's life more highly than any magical artefact, anyway," says Wyll. "It hardly matters now, Astarion."

"He's got a point," says Karlach. "Lay off."

Astarion rolls his eyes. Gale rubs his beard, his gaze fixed on the ground. Even without tapping into the tadpole, you can see the discomfort rolling off his shoulders and the lines of his face.

"He makes a good point, though," murmurs Gale. "I've asked you for your unquestioning help treating my condition. You may as well learn the truth behind it."

"Go on," says Astarion.

Gale strokes his beard in silence for a moment. You glance briefly in the psionic direction of his tadpole, and there you feel doubt and hesitation outpouring in a torrent.

"Are you familiar with the tale of Karsus?" says Gale.

Despite everything, your mother's voice still chirps in your mind that this is *your* duty to answer.

"Karsus, ruler of Netheril," you say. "Netheril collapsed because he tried to murder Mystra."

Gale nods slowly. "The greatest mage-empire the world has ever seen, wiped out by the hubris of a single man... A mage who thought he'd found a way to take control of the Weave itself. Karsus forged a crown and used it to try and seize power from the god of magic."

As he speaks, you see Gale's hands forming the somatics of an illusion. There's no illusion, of course, since he's speaking normally; nonetheless his hands move as though commanding a spell. He doesn't seem to notice he's doing it.

"Instead, he unleashed a magical catastrophe that killed the god of magic, Mystryl, and destabilised the Weave, destroying the magical foundations of Netheril." Gale's wrist flexes. the imaginary illusion, the one only apparent to you, vanishes. No more spellcasting. "Now, his kingdom is in ruins, and his creations are scattered. The tale of Karsus' Folly. Well, here's a tale far less grand, but no less inglorious... what you might call *Gale's Folly*."

"Don't tell me you tried to kill Mystra," mutters Karlach. "The crazy ones always do."

Gale laughs humorlessly.

"Worse," he says. "I tried to impress her. Let me tell you the tale."

He interlocks his fingers, stretches them. Gale doesn't seem to be very good at keeping his hands still.

"I was once what you might call a prodigy," he says. "I mastered the Weave at an incredibly young age. Wizardry has always come to me with ease."

You can see Astarion about to say something cutting, and Karlach silencing him with a look.

"When I was still a child, I was approached by a mentor... the man who paid for my education at Blackstaff and taught me the principles of Weavecraft. It wasn't until later that I learned the reason for his involvement in my life." Gale's voice softens. his expression becomes hazy, as though recalling something very far away. "The man was a Chosen of one of the gods. Mystra, the goddess of magic. Such was my talent that, in my youth, she had taken an interest in me."

"What, Mystra sent someone to have you trained?" says Karlach.

"In the beginning, yes," says Gale. "Eventually, Mystra revealed herself to me. I was asked, like my mentor, to be an instrument of her will on the Planes."

"Fuck off," says Karlach. "Mystra made you her Chosen?"

A god's Chosen. Some of the minor gods have dozens of them, or take weaker clerics as their representatives on the Planes. Mystra, though? The goddess of spellcraft, the Weaver, the embodiment of magic herself? A Chosen of a god like *that* would be someone seriously important.

Gale smiles. It's a sad, faint smile, a shadow of its usual self. "More," he says. "Mystra was my teacher. My mistress. And, later, even, my lover."

Astarion splutters. Both Karlach and Wyll stare at Gale, goggle-eyed.

You find it your duty to say, "You made love with a *goddess*?"

"Oh, yes," says Gale. "There was a time in my life where I shared my bed with a goddess. More than that! The experiences we shared, body and soul... It was indescribable."

You knew Mystra could get personal with her servants, but you didn't realise they got *this* personal. You briefly thank Oghma for his lack of sexual intervention on your behalf.

"Okay," says Karlach, squinting. "Things are pretty good for Baby Gale so far."

"Hers was the most challenging, most knowledgeable mind any wizard can have the privilege to encounter. Under her tutelage, I became an archwizard of some acclaim. For many, a perfect life. More than enough," says Gale. "More than some would ever dream."

"But not you," you say.

Gale smiles sadly.

"But not me," he says. "You see, I could never stand to be limited to the confines of traditional spellcraft. There are levels and schools of magic forbidden to all but the most divine of beings. There was nothing I could ever do to persuade Mystra to loosen my boundaries – to grant me access to the full extent of the Weave, as she has. I begged, I pleaded. I promised it was only to

serve her, that I would live to further her will... but it wasn't enough. It was never enough... she would never permit me to go beyond the threshold."

"So, I decided: I would perform an act of service so great it would unequivocally prove me worthy of Mystra's favour," Gale says. "I would find a piece of Karsus' failed Weave myself, and return it to her. So I hunted. And eventually, I located one. An ancient tome with a piece of forbidden Netherese magic, locked behind a deeply complicated arcane lock."

Gale grinds his palm into his chest. He stops speaking for a moment. He glances away, his eyes searching his memories for something.

"The moment I opened it," says Gale, "I knew I had made a mistake. I thought the Netherese orb contained within the pages was dormant. It wasn't. As soon as it had a suitable conduit, it escaped the confines of the book and drove itself directly into the nearest host – me."

His hand shifts from his chest to his collar. He pulls down the collar of his sleeping-tunic and tilts his head, so you can faintly see it; a magical scar, perfectly circular, inscribed in the centre of his chest. A lightning-strike mark emanates from the orb, up his neck, and fades as it creeps towards his eye.

"The first thing it consumed was the magic contained in my body," says Gale. "Then, when it was no longer content with just that, the magical objects in my tower. Since the day I unleashed it, it has done nothing but consume. It's voracious. It demands to be constantly fed. It's stable for now, but just barely. And if it grows too hungry..."

"You'll die?" says Karlach.

Gale blinks. He draws his hand away. his thumb lingers on the scar of the Netherese orb, for a second.

He doesn't answer for a long moment.

"Yes," he says softly, "I will die."

He smooths down the front of his robe, hiding the scar from view once more.

Karlach says, sympathetically, "Ouch."

Something rings strangely in your ears, as though the Weave is urging you not to listen. Perhaps Mystra doesn't care to have her secrets divulged.

"Gods, it would've been cheaper to leave him with Ethel," mutters Astarion. Wyll's head whips around, and his outrage makes Astarion snicker.

"What did Mystra do when she learned about the book?" you ask.

Gale shakes his head. "She vanished," he answers. "When she saw what I had done, she simply... never appeared before me again. The majority of my magical power had been drained by the orb's attachment to my soul. And so..."

"...You became a sad, single wash-up stuck in a nautiloid?" suggests Astarion. "Happens to the best of us."

Wyll and Karlach glare at him.

"Thank you for entrusting us with that story, Gale," says Wyll, the only other gentleman in a radius of probably several miles. "It can't have been easy to share."

"Mm. Well." Gale's eyes are downcast, an unhappy twitch to his lips. He reminds you of one of the pupils, a child hiding in the common room when they know they're in trouble.

"I'm going to sleep," he says, simply. "I think it's night by now."

"Who's taking the first watch?" says Wyll.

"Why bother?" mutters Gale.

"Wouldn't it be a shame if Shadowheart survived and we didn't?" Wyll says.

"I'll watch," says Lae'zel, re-entering the chamber.

Gale unrolls his bedroll next to the fire. You have no idea what time it is, but certainly all your companions look as tired as you feel. Astarion saunters away, out of sight.

You make an effort to stay conscious, just to ascertain who's sleeping and who's continuing to make conversation. But you might as well be trying to hold back a charging wolfhound on a leash. the moment there's silence, you fall back into an unsteady sleep.

The next time you're aware of your surroundings, the fire is dim and you can hear the rise and fall of sleeping breaths around you.

Well...

What can we ever do except keep going, as we were?

Go back to sleep, Eve. There's nowhere to go but forwards.

At one point, you hear Astarion's voice, then Karlach's. They murmur, a soft conversation. you don't catch any words.

At another point someone brushes you as they crawl past. you hear a whispered, 'Sorry', but you don't know who it was, in the darkness.

Other patches of wakefulness, scattered through the darkness. Dreams and nightmares, heavy tallfolk footsteps. You hear Gale saying something, in the silence, mumbling in his sleep.

It would be an awful night's sleep, under any other circumstances. But each time you wake you're relieved to find yourself alive and sane, no Absolute in your head.

This may be your last night alive, after all. You might as well savour it while you can.

You don't really wake up. you just stop falling asleep, after a point. There are no windows here, not even any cracks to let sunlight through. It might still be night. It might be morning. You might be mad. It all feels very surreal.

You wake to find everyone else still asleep, so you step your way around them. Walking between their enormous sleeping forms makes you feel like a child creeping among adults. Each of them is almost twice your size.

You step outside the room. In the large hidden chamber containing the puzzle stands Gale, his back to the doorway, his hands focused on a glowing lightning-blue illusion. You can't see what it is, only the colour and light.

"What's that?" you say, and Gale jumps. The illusion winks out of existence without you getting a chance to see it.

"Ah, I'm sorry," he says. "You startled me. I was miles away."

"It's fine. I didn't see it, whatever it was."

He blinks. "Nothing – nothing improper, I mean," he says hastily, "I was..."

He pauses. Then, he looks down at his hands, and re-conjures the image, so you can see it.

It's a woman's face. She's sculpted in soft blue light, so the colours of her skin and hair are invisible. She has soft human ears and pretty but ordinary features. Only by the starburst-pattern amulet around her neck do you recognise her as Mystra, Goddess of Magic.

"You were praying?" you suggest, because the only other alternative explanation of events is that you interrupted Gale standing by himself quietly staring at an image of his ex.

"Yes," he says. "Yes, I suppose so. Tell me – do you know what happens to a person's soul when they become a mind flayer?"

Your tadpole twitches at the thought. "It gets destroyed?"

"Correct. No resurrection, no afterlife... only the soulless, ravenous life of a mind flayer." Gale gazes at Mystra, still. His attention is certainly on you, but his eyes stay on her image, as though he's trying to memorise her features.

"The void, I suppose," you say. "The death after death."

"I didn't have you pegged for a theologian," he says, with a small smile.

"I'm no scholar. But doesn't everyone think about it?"

"I've always been more drawn to the magic and science of the material planes, not the ones beyond." says Gale. "But it's known that there exists some connection between the soul and the self... and the gods, of course. They say that our souls contain the essence of *us* – that without it, what's left behind is just a husk, a thing with no true inner complexity."

None of this is news to you, but it makes you shudder anyway.

"Mystra allows anyone to use her art, with the right knowledge." Gale stares into Mystra's image. "If I were to transform... it's possible that I could learn magic again."

"I don't think you *do* transform," you say. "I think the tadpole eats your brain and kills you."

"And yet, your memories live on within the mind flayer... just without any of the emotions or impulses that make you *you*." Gale sighs. "Mind flayers are only permitted to use magic as prescribed by the Elder Brain controlling them, and were I a mind flayer, I would, one assumes, lose my inclination to rebel. I suppose you're right."

"Why?" you ask. "Planning out your future with the illithids?"

He laughs, humourlessly. "Just thinking out loud," he says. "Death frightens me enormously, and so does non-existence... But I confess, what terrifies me most..."

He trails off, staring at Mystra. You're certain he's going to say, *I might never see her again*. You have known acolytes of many kinds. But you've never known any worshipper to look at their goddess the way Gale looks at his.

He says, "...It's that I might never do magic again. I don't know if I could live like that."

You look at the strange, alien grief in his eyes.

"I could," you admit.

He shakes his head. "Magic is my life," he murmurs. "Like poetry and music and... everything that matters, made manifest. You don't feel the same?"

"I... don't know," you say. "It's just what I was taught to do."

"I see..."

You worry that this has offended Gale, but instead he looks at you pityingly, as though he can't imagine anything worse than being neutral on magic.

You wonder how it feels to love something so much you'd rather be a soulless tentacle-husk than be without it.

The illusion turns misty, blurring Mystra's features, as Gale looks away from it.

"Eve, I think there's something I need to tell you," Gale murmurs.

"What is it?" you say, warily.

The illusion fades away, like a wisp of smoke curling into the air.

"Last night," he says slowly, "When – Astarion asked what would happen, if I stopped feeding the orb... And I said that I would die..."

"Yes?"

"I haven't been entirely honest," he says, eyes distant, "About... the *entirety*... of what might happen... if the Netherese orb were to destabilise."

A little Ethel-sounding bell rings at the back of your mind.

"You see, it *would* kill me, yes, but specifically, the orb would... according to my calculations... release the stored Netherese magic from within. Rather, er... explosively."

"Oh."

"The explosion would be... well, it would..."

He trails off.

He looks at the ground.

You can't bring yourself to feel anything except resigned.

"How bad is it?" you ask.

He sighs. "Maybe I'd be better off showing you," he says, "Than telling you. Give me your hand."

You obey; to your surprise he kneels, bringing himself down so you're face-to-face. He takes your hand and places your palm, gently, on his chest. you feel the Netherese orb through the cloth of his robes, a note of discord snagging in the Weave like the chugging cough of Karlach's engine. You feel your tadpole suddenly perk up, and Gale's presence in your mind lights up like a lighthouse, the door to his thoughts swinging gently and expertly open.

Gingerly, you let Gale show you a memory. You watch through his eyes as he dispels the last bit of magical protection from the book's seal. You feel his anticipation as he reaches down to turn the first page.

And then –

– as the orb rushes towards you, closing in, suffocating you, finding the core of you, and drives
itself into your chest –

and, lord –

IT **BURNS** LIKE THE FIRES OF AVERNUS – IT **HOLLOWS** OUT YOUR SOUL – AND
YOU FEEL THE SHAPE OF SOMETHING ALIVE, **ENORMOUS** – ALL YOU CAN DO IS
SWALLOW **AS MUCH AS YOU CAN** AS IT FILLS OUT THE CAVITY OF YOUR CHEST
AND **ELECTROCUTES YOUR SOUL – GODS!** – YOU KNOW IN YOUR CORE THAT –
IT – WILL – KILL YOU –

AND AS IT EATS – AND EATS – AND **EATS** –

– and you lock yourself in your tower, and you **PLUNDER** every magic object you have, then as
many as you can buy, and then, when you can give no more, when you have used every last scrap
you have, that's when you start to **STEAL**.

Because you **KNOW** WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF YOU **DON'T FEED IT**.

AND YOU CANNOT – LET IT – DESTROY – WATERDEEP.

You croak, "How the hell are you still alive?"

Gale takes your hand off his chest, gently. He withdraws the vision as gracefully as he conveyed it.

"There," he says. "The truth. The one I was terrified Auntie Ethel was going to use for her own purposes."

"The explosion." Your mouth is dry. "It could destroy all of Waterdeep. That's – miles."

"You recall that the first time we met I had the means to create a portal to another plane," says Gale. "I kept it prepared at all times. Not as a means of escape, but as a final resort in the worst case scenario. But now that it's gone, I have no such means to re-create it."

"But," you say, "Then..."

"If the orb isn't quelled regularly, then, yes: I will not only be completely annihilated, but so will most of the surrounding environs, and everything within."

"What would happen to the orb if you turned into a mind flayer?" you ask.

He drags his eyes up to yours, briefly.

"That question," he says, "Has plagued me day and night since the Nautiloid."

By his body language alone you can infer that Gale knows which outcome is more likely.

"Do the others know?" you ask, and he shakes his head slowly.

"Just you," he says.

Another secret on the heap.

"Well..." You say. "...Good to have in our back pocket if we get transformed, I suppose."

Gale doesn't laugh. He looks at you in surprise.

"You aren't – angry?"

He's such a well-spoken man, and this is such a plaintive, childlike question, that it catches you off guard.

"Why would I be?" you say. "There's nothing to be done about it."

"Why would – I mean, aside from the fact that I deceived you into travelling with me, despite the danger I pose – "

"Don't be melodramatic," you say. "Letting you die in the wilderness wouldn't have helped, if the explosion would be that big."

He works his jaw. He says, "If you'd left me with Auntie Ethel—"

"Gale, that's silly."

This sufficiently shuts him up.

"Did you find anything magic after Astarion pickpocketed the Bag of Holding off you?" you ask him.

He shakes his head. "I can hold out for a little while longer," he says.

"I'm sure if we live, we'll sort something out. And if we don't, at least we'll be smithereens instead of mind flayers."

The ghost of a smile touches his lips. "Thank you," he says.

"I wouldn't worry about it. You wouldn't be the first wizard to get cursed trying to impress a woman," you conclude. "You haven't exploded yet, so there's no point overthinking it, anyway,"

Gale is silent in response. Then, suddenly, he snorts.

"What?" you say.

He presses his hand to his mouth, shoulders shaking, and sniggers.

Then he laughs. Quietly at first, then, unable to muffle it any longer, he doubles over and Suddenly it's like you've just told him the funniest joke in the world. He's laughing hysterically.

"Hah! *What?!'*" he guffaws.

"What is it? Is Mystra *not* a woman anymore? I told you I wasn't a theologian!"

From the other room, distantly, you hear Astarion's voice: "*Would you shut the fuck up out there? Some of us are trying to rest!*"

"Gale, you're making a fool of me in front of Astarion," you say, and this makes him laugh even harder. You can't tell if he's laughing at you or just having some sort of unusual mental breakdown.

For a while you just have to wait while he quiets himself down enough to speak. You choose to believe that you have cheered up Gale, and not that you have irreparably broken him.

"Oh..." He wipes his eyes. "Don't mind me."

"Easy to say! What's so funny?"

"Nothing, nothing!" He shakes his head, but the grin is still tugging his lips. "Only that, if I had the wisdom of your counsel long ago, perhaps I would never have been foolish enough to acquire the orb in the first place."

"You know you're not so tall that I can't box you in the ears?"

"I wouldn't dream of forgetting." He smiles. "But... Sincerely, thank you. It is a heavy burden off my shoulders indeed to have someone else know the truth, and an even greater relief to be accepted in spite of it."

"Well, if we get out of here alive, I hope you're ready to do it four more times," you say, "Five, if we find Shadowheart."

"Ah... I'd happily share every sordid detail, if it could guarantee us our survival," he says. "As it is... Well. I'm no Chosen of Mystra, not anymore."

He sighs.

"As you say, there's no point overthinking it, is there," he says. "Or, in this case... not much point thinking about it *any* which way, over or otherwise."

"No," you agree. "Best focus on what's in front of us, for now."

Which is, currently, a dark empty room with an unsolved puzzle sitting sadly in the middle of it, and nothing but the quiet sound of scrabbling animals and distant, sleeping adventurers.

You remember your lute-case in the other room, with your sleeping companions.

"Gale," you say, "Could I ask you about something?"

He looks at you curiously.

"You see, I have these papers," you say, "When the Nautiloid caught me—"

There's a small, scrabbling animal sound in the corridor. You both pause.

Something is scratching just outside the room you're in.

"Rats?" you suggest nervously.

Gale shakes his head. "Bigger," he says. "Hold on. Get behind me..."

You'd protest, but you don't have your lute, and anyway Gale is already positioning himself so he's between you and the sound. Frowning, he flicks his wrist and sends a globe of light down the chamber, towards the sound.

The light reveals the source of the sound poking its head from the hard-packed dirt under the cracked stone tiles. It's a mole, unbothered by both the light and the two people staring at it, digging its way out of the ground.

"Ah!" says the mole. "And here I was thinking the goblins had killed you and tossed your bodies into the Underdark."

The mole has a man's voice – deep, intelligent, entirely unlike every other animal you've heard speak up to now.

"That's—" you say. "You're—"

It calmly pulls itself from the ground, shakes off the dirt, and then hunches. you hear a druidic twinge in the air as the mole's form dissolves and reforms before you. There's a rush of displaced air as the animal expands and solidifies, and then instead of a mole there's a man, kneeling on the ground, rising to stand as you both gawp at him.

He's the largest elf you've ever seen. There's nothing willowy or *elfin* about him; he's a towering, barrel-chested beast of a man, druidic tattoos swirling over his enormous muscles. His clothes are ragged and dirty, but unmistakably the same garb as the ones worn by the enclave in the Grove.

When he sees you both staring, he gives you a large grin.

"Well met," he says. "If you have questions, ask them quickly – we have a long way to travel if we hope to reach the Grove before next sunrise."

You say, in a daze, "You're Halsin?"

He smiles.

"I see my reputation precedes me," he says. "And *you* are the intrepid adventuring party who came here to learn the truth of the Absolute."

"Sorry," says Gale, "When you say – next sunrise—?"

Halsin rolls his large shoulders.

"By my reckoning, that's when the goblins plan to attack," says Halsin. "Which means we have very little time in which to stop them."

Both of you are too stunned to respond for a moment, and there's a little crack of astonishment in Gale's voice when he finally says, "Stop them *how?*"

Halsin grins.

"Don't you know that when a druid transforms, he can take with him into his form as much as he can wear and carry?" he says. "We'll use the smokepowder, of course. We'll destroy Minthara's entire army before they can even reach the Grove."

Chapter 13

Halsin is nothing like Kagha. He listens patiently, with an easy serenity to him. When you tell him about the Nautiloid, the tadpoles, and the artefact, he only calmly nods at each new revelation.

All he says, when you finish regaling him with your sorry story so far, is, "Please, allow me to examine that parasite – perhaps I can help."

You're back in the room where you slept, packing up your meagre camp and gathering together your meagre belongings, getting ready to leave the sanctum on Halsin's command.

Most of you, anyway. Lae'zel is clearly unsure about listening to someone who isn't loyal to Vlaakith, and Astarion keeps glancing at the exit like he's planning on doing a runner at any moment.

To you, helping Halsin seems like a better idea by the minute. You have to admit: it is blissful to have someone with any real qualifications whatsoever to tell you what to do.

Halsin towers over you even when he's kneeling. He examines your face with the clinical well-practised touch of a healer. He uses his finger and thumb to gently open the lids of your left eye and examine the iris inside, his gaze passing through you entirely.

You worry the tadpole behind your eye will disgust him, but his expression softens instead with pity.

"Oak Father's mercy," he murmurs, in response to whatever he sees. "You truly are infected."

He straightens back up. Halsin is bigger than everyone in the room except Karlach, but even then his presence is larger than hers. His druids' robe is tattered and bloodstained beyond recognition, but he still seems so obviously to radiate *archdruid*.

"I admit, that you were infected aboard a mind flayer ship is... baffling to me," says Halsin.

"According to what little information Nettie and I could find, the heart of the Absolute's operation is within Moonrise Towers – where Minthara receives her orders. Worshippers of the Absolute travel there, and True Souls leave."

"We keep hearing that name," says Wyll, "Moonrise. Where is it?"

Halsin's eyes grow distant.

"Once the site of a great and bloody battle between the forces of light and the worshippers of Shar," he says. "Now, it is merely a ruin – a husk at the heart of a deeply corrupted landscape. I had thought nothing but the dead could thrive there, since we defeated the Dark Justiciars..."

The warriors of Shar. It's a good thing Shadowheart isn't here. this conversation would surely make her twitchy.

"That's where the Absolute was trying to lure us, before Shadowheart intervened," says Gale.

"The battle was over a century ago," says Halsin. "Few survive that remember the place. It troubles me to hear its name again, after all these years..."

Halsin shakes his head.

"If curing these tadpoles is your goal," he says, "Then your best chance would be to brave the curse surrounding the tower and infiltrate the cult there."

"There's nothing you can do?" says Wyll.

"Not without understanding what was done to these parasites at Moonrise, or on the nautiloid," he says. "I suspect that is the only key to removing them. They are, to my knowledge, incurable."

That's not really a surprise to hear. It barely hurts.

Standing by the wall, distrustfully refusing to turn her back on the druid, Lae'zel scoffs. "By the standards of *your* people, maybe. A *zaith'isk* would purge them completely."

Halsin is an excellent diplomat. None of Lae'zel's alien comments have fazed him a bit.

"I fear even the best of Gith's children would be unable to unravel a Netherese enchantment like this." Halsin strokes his chin. "It is entirely unlike anything I have ever witnessed. These tadpoles' specific mutations... Whoever, or whatever, is responsible for this magic is very dangerous indeed."

Lae'zel is clearly torn between her contempt for Halsin and her burning curiosity to learn more about the Absolute. She hates everything he says, but hangs onto his every word. "What kind of mutations?" she demands. "What else have you discovered?"

"I will give you as many answers as you desire," says Halsin smoothly, "If you help me defeat Minthara."

This has been Halsin's line for the past duration. Lae'zel glowers.

"I would like to remind everyone that we *tried* defeating Minthara and *definitively* failed!" Astarion protests.

The holes in Astarion's shirt have been painstakingly repaired, but the bloodstains are still visible. He's clearly scrambling for a way out, although you don't know what he's expecting to find. Nobody else will join him.

Wyll, Karlach and Gale immediately consented to defending the Grove without question. Lae'zel is sceptical, but the promise of a second round against Minthara has clearly put a glimmer in her eyes. You have personally committed to just going along with things until you're dead, at this point.

"Minthara surprised us," says Lae'zel. "She will not do so again."

"Her army is formidable, but not so large that a number of smokepowder bombs would not scatter them," says Halsin. "The advantage will not be hers this time – I swear it."

Lae'zel is quiet for a moment. Her green eyes flit in contemplation. It's obvious that Lae'zel is thinking about smokepowder bombs, and how much she would like to throw one at Minthara.

"Show me," says Lae'zel.

Astarion throws his hands in the air.

"Come," says Halsin, "Let me show you where we've been hiding."

"Hiding?" says Gale, and then, "We?"

"All will be made clear," promises Halsin, although, it must be said, you don't believe him.

Halsin sweeps through the doorway, which is almost too large to contain him, and heads back towards the heart of the complex.

Wyll follows close behind him. He hasn't said much about it, but Wyll's eagerness is palpable. Lae'zel storms after them, armour rattling.

One by one, Gale waits for the others to file ahead of him. He sweeps them ahead gallantly with his arm, making a show of being very normal and fine.

When it's just him and you remaining, he whispers, "With regard to the matter of..."

You raise a finger to your lips, suspecting Astarion is nearby even though there's no trace of him. Gale hesitates.

You say, "How long can you hold it?" At his expression, you clarify: "Before you need to eat?"

His face twitches. He says, "Two days won't kill me."

"I'll find you something by tonight," you say. "Let's discuss it more if we survive."

Gale hesitates, but there's no time for him to respond at length, and he seems to decide against it. He nods.

You take the deadly Netherese orb in Gale's chest and shove it to the back of your mind with all of the other horseshit. You have better things to worry about right now.

There are two reasons Halsin hasn't returned to the Grove already. The first is that he's got twelve deadly, volatile barrels full of smokepowder and only a limited capacity for strapping them to himself then turning into an animal and running as far as he can in half an hour.

The second is named Liam, who Halsin spent a day or two carefully nursing back to health after Minthara failed to torture the Grove's location out of him. Having been personally killed by Minthara yourself, you are deeply impressed by Liam's fortitude.

"If we'd known about the secret room, we'd have been out of here much sooner," says Liam, rubbing the back of his neck. He's thin and grimy, his face hollowed-out with hunger, and he seems in equal awe and terror of Halsin. "We found this cave, but it was a dead end."

They'd been hiding out in a crevice, waiting for their opportunity to escape while keeping the goblin's most devastating weapons hidden from them. As plans went, it was extremely simplistic, but you can't criticise it too harshly. It saved your life, after all.

Liam was one of Aradin's crew, the most recent addition to an adventuring party that followed a quest from Baldur's Gate to here only to find a horde of goblins instead of the abandoned temple full of treasure they'd been promised. Given the attitude on Aradin, you're surprised that Liam cared enough to risk death for the sake of the Grove. They weren't soft on him in captivity. He's weak and trembling, his skin mottled with fresh, magically-healed scars.

"I'm surprised Halsin didn't pick you up and transform, Liam," says Wyll. "We saw Shadow-Druids doing that to one of the tiefling children."

Halsin's brow furrows. "Only a Shadow-Druid would be capable of such a feat," he says, "Not of skill, but of cruelty... What a repulsive thing to do to a child."

When you told him about Kagha's crusade against the refugees and her collusion with the Shadow-Druids, he only nodded silently, but you didn't miss the glint of fury in his eyes.

Lae'zel and Astarion are cramming the last smokepowder barrel into the Bag of Holding. They're goblin-sized, which makes them mini to Lae'zel, and throwable to anyone with muscles as powerful as hers or Karlach's. Karlach, however, has been firmly banned from standing within a dozen paces of the smokepowder, just to be safe.

This smokepowder is alchemical-grade. This isn't the kind of smokepowder you use to make fireworks. It's the kind dwarves use to make explosives for mining adamant, and occasionally for siege warfare. With the shattered sanctum in the state it's in, twelve barrels would be enough to collapse the entire structure.

Lae'zel is not a joyful woman by nature, but when she laid her eyes on this stash of barrels, she smiled like a little girl on the morning of her birthday.

"Before we leave, we should search the goblins' food stores, if supplies are as scarce as you say," says Halsin.

"Good idea!" says Karlach. "Keep the people going a bit longer."

"Minthara's army will move more slowly on foot than we will, but it's still the case that she's got a considerable head start," says Gale. "Even if we left now, and assuming Minthara stops to rest her forces before she attacks, we'd still be lucky to make it to the Grove within the day. Do we have time to search the encampment? I'm sure they'll have left guards."

Halsin smiles reassuringly. His face is gently lined with age, his long hair showing just the slightest hint of greying. But Halsin is an *elf*. To appear middle-aged means Halsin is at least several centuries old. When Halsin smiles reassuringly, it brooks no argument: everything will be fine.

"You travel alongside an archdruid of the Emerald Enclave," says Halsin. "Speed will not be an issue."

You can see immediately why Halsin was so sorely missed by the Grove, and you can also immediately see why he must have greatly frustrated the other druids. He's persuasive, observant, quick to take charge. He's very unlike most druids in that regard.

"Give me the bag, and I'll fill it," says Karlach. "I mean, not literally fill it. It's bottomless. I'll put enough food in it to feed the refugees, I mean."

"What if they left behind enough guards to stop us?" you say.

"Are you incapable of slaying even a single guard patrol of goblins?" says Lae'zel.

"Last time you said that, goblins killed you!" you protest. "It's actually very easy to be killed! It's a little-known fact about adventuring!"

Wyll claps you on the shoulder. Halsin's arrival was all Wyll needed to regain his starry-eyed optimism.

"You have nothing to fear," he says, as though *he* was the one toting around five dead souls last night. "Minthara caught us off-guard. We won't make the same mistake twice."

"I *hope* not!" you say. "There might not be a devil next time."

Halsin arches an eyebrow at this, but he says nothing.

In the end Astarion and Karlach take the Bag of Holding and go off to rob the place, reasoning that if Karlach can't kill whoever they encounter then at least you'll hear the explosion when she dies.

"As for the rest of us, I would prefer to wait outside," says Halsin. "I have had enough of this dank place."

"Are you sure?" you say, but Halsin is already leaving, striding away without pause.

Just one goblin sees you as Halsin leads you confidently through the shattered sanctum like he owns the place.

Halsin gestures at the goblin, carelessly, and vines erupt from the ground and ensnare her before she can make a sound.

"All the Oak Father's creations deserve some grace," says Halsin, "But after my confinement, I find myself with very little left to spare for these particular goblins. Hah!"

He barely looks at her. He keeps striding, and you follow after, like obedient children, as he leads you out into the now-abandoned courtyard.

The sunlight stings your eyes after so long in the dimly-lit temple complex.

Halsin stands for a moment, inhaling the fresh air. Liam hangs back, hiding in the doorway, as though afraid to step into the light.

Lae'zel looks up at the sun, squinting, and scowls.

"Our time is limited," she says. "We should embark as soon as possible."

Halsin, calm as anything, kneels before a crack in the paving-tiles and starts to scratch at the exposed earth.

"Patience," he says. "Minthara is no fool. She will wait until she has every advantage to attack, and she will hide her forces until the last moment – her first move will be to find an advantageous point in the terrain to attack from, and prepare her forces to invade from there."

"And you think we can find them first?" says Gale.

Halsin grins. "With ease," he says. "An army of goblins within this wilderness would be unmistakably easy to find. I know these wilds. Things are not easily concealed from me within it. Once located, we would wait for the encampment to let down its guard..."

"And strike them when they are most vulnerable." Lae'zel is hungry for battle. She practically licks her lips.

Halsin nods. "Precisely. With the Bag of Holding and enough spellcasting for support, the entire encampment could be rigged to explode without any of the army realising."

"Much like we did to the goblins when they chased Aradin to the gate." Gale nods his approval. "Not the noblest way to do battle... but certainly the most deadly."

"Being *noble* is a privilege we don't have," says Wyll. "Not now, when there are innocent lives on the line."

In the small patch of dirt before him, Halsin scratches out a small hole. He bends, whispers, and takes from his pockets a small seed, which he drops into the earth. He begins to dig out another little hole.

When Astarion and Karlach re-appear, they're unscathed, although Astarion is wearing a quiver full of freshly-bloodied arrows. Astarion hands the Bag of Holding to Halsin, which has gained only a slight suggestion of bulk since they began filling it.

"Enough barrels of firewine to lay a flammable trail from here to the Gate," grins Karlach, "And there should be enough left over for the afterparty."

Astarion adds, "Oh, and enough food to gorge a village, provided they're not picky. None of the meat is humanoid, and that's probably as good as it gets."

Nobody asks Astarion why he knows how to recognise humanoid meat.

"This is looking like a decidedly *fiery* battle," says Gale.

"I'm starting to get fired up alright," says Karlach, rolling her shoulders. Her engine sputters. "The more I think about it, the more I like the idea of exploding Minthara to tiny bits."

"She's caused a lot of grief for the innocent people in the Grove, too," says Gale. "I burned one squad of her goblins to ashes. I'm quite prepared to do so again."

There's a hint of the same adrenaline-mad grin on his face as he says it. Everyone's eager, it seems. You find yourself missing Shadowheart, the only one of you smart enough to flee before she was killed.

Halsin continues to dig little holes, planting a seed in each, murmuring softly as he does.

When he's finished he stands, and gestures for you to back off and make room around the seeds.

"Further," he says. Then: "Further still."

Only when you're about twenty paces away does Halsin clap his hands firmly together and bark out a spell in Druidic. There's a rush of air and magic as Halsin's ritual garden glows, flashes, and conjures eight horses.

The surge of power is so sudden it tugs at your stomach, making you yelp. The smell of earth fills your nostrils.

The horses are sleek and beautiful, and almost entirely normal-looking. There's only one sign they were conjured, which is that each has a coating of creeping ivy, vines, and moss all over, like an overgrown statue.

The rest of your companions are as shocked as you are, and Halsin grins when he sees your faces.

"I am not the Archdruid for nothing, you know," he says. "Come! We have a lot of ground to cover before tomorrow."

You stare. Wyll doesn't even hesitate. He vaults onto the nearest horse like an eager circus performer.

Astarion looks around, searching for someone to say something that will spare him the indignity of riding a nonexistent horse into battle. There is nobody.

You stare up at a towering, leafy horse.

"I can't get up there," you say, "I'm too small."

In response, the horse clops over to you, bows its enormous head, and kneels. The ivy growing all over it makes it admittedly easier to climb.

You decide to test your ability to communicate with animals and say, "Thank you."

The horse glances back at you. Its eye sockets are filled with glowing orbs, radiating arcane light.

"You're welcome," it responds, in a perfect replica of Halsin's voice. You decide against speaking to the magic horses any more.

When you're all mounted on the horses – Wyll looking like the portrait of a hero on horseback, Lae'zel gamely doing her best although it's clear she's never ridden a horse in her life – Halsin glances over you, his small and eclectic cavalry, and nods.

"Good!" he says. "Minthara won't wait for us. Let us ride!"

There are no reigns, only leaves and vines. The horses' glossy coats are the exact colour of the earth, and smell of woodland rain.

Halsin barks a word of Druidic, and the horses start to run.

It is a hell of a lot faster to travel through the wilderness on magic horseback than on foot, especially with Halsin leading the way. He knows paths through the thickets that are entirely invisible to you. Occasionally, when the way forward is overgrown, Halsin will gesture at the plants and they will regrow themselves out of the way. You are certain the grass is bending to help you pass.

Not that you can tell. You've never ridden a horse this fast in your life, and there is a reason short-limbed little halflings generally prefer ponies to horses. You are not sitting on the horse's back so much as desperately clinging to it.

It's gruelling. It's faster, no doubt, and made faster still by riding in the trampled wake of Minthara's army, but it's uneven grassy terrain on horses with saddles that don't, strictly speaking, exist. By the time you stop to rest the horses, your body is sore in unspeakable places.

Halsin walks to the nearest tree, immediately hefts himself up into the branches, and starts climbing. The horses wander off to chew the grass.

Gale glances up at the sky, then at a random point on the horizon. "Halsin wasn't joking," he says, "Speed is not an issue. I'd say at this pace, we'll be back at the Grove shortly before nightfall."

You're impressed he can tell. It's sunny and the wilderness is still there. That's as much as *you* can deduce from your surroundings.

Halsin drops from the trees as gracefully as a wildcat. He walks over to one of the horses, places a hand on its neck, and briefly speaks to it. Then he strides over and stands before your group, Liam bobbing at his side.

"We're close," Halsin says. "Just a little ways east. The gnolls are wandering closer to the Risen Road at the moment, and there's no sign of Minthara's army, either."

"And when we arrive?" says Wyll. "What's the plan?"

Halsin glances around at your expectant faces, then the sky, and clears his throat.

"The Grove has but one entrance," says Halsin. "We know where Minthara will strike. My plan is simple, but hopefully, effective. We use the cover of darkness to trap the Grove's entrance with smokepowder. When they cluster to destroy the gate, we detonate the traps. With luck, that should disable a majority of her goblins. The rest... well, you defended the Grove once before, did you not?"

Karlach cracks her knuckles. "I missed that battle," she says, "I'm looking forward to this one. Gods, it feels good to fight for something actually worth *fighting for*."

That makes Halsin smile. "After the battle is done, I will ensure that all the refugees know you as the adventurers who saved their lives," he says.

"What about the druids? Would they help?" you ask Halsin. "If you gave the order."

Halsin says, "As their Archdruid—"

Lae'zel – who until now was standing a little off to the side, pretending she wasn't listening – says, "You abandoned them under siege. You expect them to take orders from you?"

You're shocked by how perceptive her comment is. You watch a flicker of pain pass over Halsin's face.

"We didn't know all of this would happen," protests Liam. "We thought the temple was empty. We weren't expecting so many goblins!"

"But the hardship my absence caused has been very real indeed," murmurs Halsin. "She makes a valid point. I will try to reason with the others, but..." Halsin shakes his head.

You're struck by the difference between Halsin and Kagha. Kagha acts more like a stereotypical druid than Halsin does – protective, xenophobic, quick to violence. You wonder what the Grove thinks of the pair of them.

"But that's all ahead of us yet," says Halsin. "The Grove awaits. Let us ride."

As you mount your magically-conjured horses again, your thoughts flit back to Minthara, ruby-red eyes gleaming with hatred, flinging you down the chasm like a broken doll. She spoke to you directly. She called you an insect.

Some people make the world better by living, says your mother's voice, and some don't.

Maybe Karlach is right. Maybe blowing up Minthara *will* feel good.

The sun is low in the sky by the time you've passed by the blighted village and towards the Grove's environs, but still the ride is a blur of rushing air and leaves.

The horses dematerialise shortly before the Grove comes into view. It happens slowly, with each horse slowly stiffening and stopping; the vines completely envelop the beasts in leaves and vegetation, then suddenly wither away to nothing, leaving behind only scraps of earth and torn leaves.

You leave the detritus behind, although Lae'zel stands pensively over the remains of her horse for a moment. You make a note to explain to her later that horses don't normally do this.

Halsin only has eyes for the gate. He barely pauses, abandoning his collapsing horse-construct and setting towards the Grove's entrance without breaking his stride. The clearing where you fought the invading goblins for the first time is still scorched where Gale cast his grease-spell; the grassy knoll he stood atop looms over the clearing, sandwiching the battlefield between itself and the gate, blood-spattered and stained with grease dried in the baking sun. You see tieflings moving about the ramparts as you approach, and hear voices raised over the trees.

"Halsin!" Someone shouts as you emerge into the open. "It's Halsin! He's back!"

More voices join them. The portcullis grinds open as yells float over the trees.

By the time Halsin is approaching the gate, tieflings are standing on the ramparts and emerging from the entrance, beaming with joy.

"Thank the Great Guard!" The tiefling manning the portcullis wheel leans over the rampart wall, a grin spreading across her face. "You did it! You found him!"

You hear the news bouncing back towards the Hollow.

"They're back! They rescued Halsin!"

None of you bother to clarify that Halsin is the one who rescued you.

Coming back to the Grove gives you the strange feeling of coming home after a long journey. It's not exactly familiar or comfortable, but compared to the goblin camp it's extremely cozy. You find yourself worrying after Arabella, Nettie.

It's been less than two days, but it feels like so much longer. A small part of you is so tired, it cries out that you should go hide among the civilians, leave the battle to the others and Halsin.

You squash this instinct – squashing your instincts is second nature by this point – and look around.

There's no sign of Shadowheart, though you get the sense of her echo somewhere in the Weave, as though she were somewhere close by. Did she come back?

The tieflings on the ramparts are climbing down to see you, Zevlor among them. Tieflings hug Halsin, shake his hand, as though he were an Eluturian tiefling and not an archdruid at all.

Zevlor steps forward to clasp Halsin's arm, his face solemn in understanding, and Halsin leans to mutter quietly in Zevlor's ear.

Someone familiar approaches you. Bex, the refugee who gave you the tour of the Hollow with her husband Danis, touches your shoulder. She's one of several curious people forming a group around you.

"You survived!" she says. "I wasn't completely sure you would, to be honest."

"It was close," you say. Bex purses her lips sympathetically.

"What happened?" she asks. "One of your friends came back alone."

"Shadowheart!" Karlach exclaims. "Is she here? Where?"

"No, no, the bard who was here before," says Bex. "He came back. He said he'd seen you, and you were alright and still looking for Halsin, but..."

That must be Volo. You say, "Oh. The bard."

Bex winces. "He's the only person who's arrived. Sorry."

"Damn!" says Karlach. "Fighting off Minthara was gonna be a lot easier with a cleric. Where'd she go?"

Bex's eyes go wide. "Fighting off who?"

Zevlor shouts, from atop a small ledge in the grass, "People! A moment, please!"

Bex falls silent, but her eyes stay nervous. Further into the Hollow, you can see refugees peeking out of their tents, and knots of conversation beginning to form sparked by your arrival.

"Guards, take your sentry positions!" Zevlor calls out. "Lakrissa, go to the cavern and gather the children! The rest of you, please assemble in the central chamber. We've received word that the goblins are planning an attack!"

That causes a ripple of consternation to pass through the crowd. Bex glances at you.

"Tomorrow morning," you say. "That's when we think they're coming."

"Tomorrow?!" Bex's voice cracks, but she stops herself from crying out too loudly. She glances around nervously after, trying not to cause a panic. "Tomorrow? But last time Danis almost – you're sure?"

Karlach waves her hands. "It's fine! That's loads of time to set up defences. That gate is as easy to defend as anything, and with me chopping up any goblins still left, you'll be *fine*."

Bex nods, but she's obviously not reassured. Karlach glances between you and her, then darts over to Halsin. She reappears with the Bag of Holding and a large toothy grin.

"We've got supplies as well. We even brought food!" Karlach declares. "Look, there's loads of–"

You see she's about to pull the drawstring and you instinctively rush to block her hand. "Karlach! Don't!"

The palm of your hand brushes against Karlach's fingertips as you stop her reaching in, and her skin burns like the surface of a screaming kettle. You yelp.

Karlach yanks her hands away, dropping the Bag to the ground with a bizarrely gentle thump.

"Oh – fuck me, I forgot about the smokepowder!" she says. "Are – are you okay? Shit– uh–"

She spends a moment stuck between words. Karlach has unusual eyes for a tiefling. she's got white eyeballs instead of black, making it much easier to see where she's looking and how she's feeling. She's staring at your hand with big sorry eyes.

"Smokepowder?" says Bex. "Why do you have that?"

Karlach glances quickly between you and Bex before plastering the smile back on her face.

"Stole it!" Karlach beams. "The goblin had crates of the stuff – enough to blow up the whole Hollow if we wanted to."

Bex's eyes turn very round. She says, "The goblins had that much smokepowder? Just to use it on... us?"

You see Karlach's tail give a reflexive twitch of guilt. "Er. No! I mean, we don't know. Probably not. The Absolute probably has them doing loads of things. And it doesn't matter now, the smokepowder's ours!"

Bex nods mutely.

"I suppose – I suppose I'd better go and help gather the others," she says. And then: "Gods, it never stops."

She slips away. Most of the other tieflings are doing the same.

Karlach's tail lashes angrily – common among tiefling children, but less in adults. On another person, it would make her look a little childlike, as though she'd stamped her foot. On Karlach, any hint of anger looks terrifyingly dangerous.

"I'm going to fucking kill Minthara," Karlach growls. Her engine's rumble deepens, and there's a rattling *click-click-click*. Something inside it pops, and you feel a ripple of heat in the air.

"Karlach, your engine, it's–"

"*I know*," she spits.

"You need to go and see Dammon! You can't leave it like that."

Karlach coughs. Smoke puffs from the valves in her skin. "It's got me this far," she says.

"Well, that can't have been very healthy, can it? You're on *fire*."

Karlach snorts. Her shoulders relax, and the engine's rumble slows.

"Alright, *mum*," she says. "You've probably got a point. I'll go and find Dammon."

That leaves you alone. Everyone else has drifted apart. Wyll and Lae'zel stand by Halsin, deep in discussion. Zevlor continues to issue commands, mostly by walking around and muttering them quietly into ears. You don't see Gale, or Astarion – they must have gone deeper inside already.

You busy yourself by rummaging through the Bag of Holding for food, given that you're at less risk of destroying any flammables you touch than Karlach is. Using the Bag is a strange experience. Every time you think about the supplies and reach into the bag, it contains a different bundle, one just large enough for you to grab and remove.

When she sees the food, the elderly quartermaster Okta and gives a cry of joy, upcoming battle or no.

"Better to die fighting than starving," she says. "Ikaron, come and carry these to the storeroom! And then go around to the parents and give them a pouch of the figs each, in case they get separated. And two for Mol and hers as well. And then go and report to Zevlor!"

An evidently very hardworking young man gives a nod and starts collecting up bundles as Okta moves on, gathering an armful of supplies and sweeping off into the Grove.

"We've already got oil barrels that we can use to set fires at most vulnerable gaps in our defences," Zevlor is saying to Halsin, "But in order to get the most out of the smokepowder, we should be targeting the earth mound shortly outside of the gates. It'll be the obvious choice for the back lines to take cover behind, and we should be maximising the effects of rubble and dust to our advantage."

"Too many in one place would run the risk of wasting the munitions in a single misfire," Lae'zel insists. Zevlor and Halsin are both bigger and taller than she is, but when she's standing among them with her chin held high she looks very much like the Grove's third commander.

You half-listen to Zevlor, Halsin, and Lae'zel talk about choke points, ambush tactics, battle strategies.

Wyll is standing with them, but perfectly silent, his brow furrowed in concentration, and has been since you arrived. Occasionally he nods or frowns, proving he's still listening.

"Aradin and the others – where are they?" Liam asks. "Did they leave the Grove without me?"

"I think so," you say. "Aradin got into an argument."

Liam winces. "Course they did," he says. "I'll stay and fight."

"You will do no such thing," says Halsin firmly. "I will take you to see Nettie, my assistant. She has the full run of my laboratory, and it was on account of *my* people that you were tortured – I will not let you fight when you have endured so much with little treatment. Let me guide you there–"

"I'll take you, Liam," you say, tired of standing around holding the Bag and feeling useless. "I know where Nettie is."

"Would you? Thank you. Wait with Nettie, and I'll be there as soon as I can," says Halsin, and immediately returns his attention to Zevlor. "A detonation on the west side of the cliff would be too unstable... the stones have a slant, and the rocks fall facing the east side..."

Much to discuss. They rapidly forget you and Liam as you set down the path to the inner circle.

If you thought *you* found riding the horses difficult, you had it very easy compared to Liam. He's shattered, almost too exhausted to walk straight. You'd take him by the arm, only he's far too tall and long-limbed for you to support him properly. Instead you walk alongside him as he hobbles.

You wonder what he's been through, hiding in the dark with Halsin for days on end. Halsin would have been keeping them alive with magic, of course, but even that has its limits. Magic is excellent at healing wounds, but pretty ineffective at healing everything else – cold, starvation, and fatigue can only be staved off for so long. The memory of being tortured by a cult of drow and goblins probably doesn't fade easily, either.

"Are you alright?" you ask Liam, when he stumbles. "You look terrible."

He winces as you say it – perhaps you could've been more tactful.

"I'm better than Brian," he responds. "They cut him to bits. Said they'd eat him."

You recall that someone politely offered you dwarf leg at the goblin party. They did eat Brian, spit-roasted over a fire with marinade. You decide not to share this.

Whispers of conflict are travelling quickly through the Grove. Already people are starting to move, gathering their families and their belongings. The druids have made themselves sparse, too. You don't know where they go when they're not in the stone circle, but given that they're shape-shifters, they probably have no issue hiding when they want to.

You fervently hope that nobody will be waiting inside the druids' chambers, but you are disappointed. Kagha and Rath are exactly where they always are. They both stare when they see Liam.

Other druids are packed in here too, murmuring and whispering amongst themselves. News of Halsin's return and Minthara's attack has obviously travelled this far, based on the deeply strange anticipation in the air.

Nobody stops you as you press your way through to Nettie's chamber, which is silent but for the bubbling and boiling of various alchemical solutions, and contains only Nettie and her little bird.

Nettie lights up when she sees you.

"Treefather's blessings," she says, and gives you the same gentle hand-to-chest salute Halsin did when he first met you. "I heard you brought Halsin home."

"It's more Halsin brought *us* home," you say. "This is Liam, one of Aradin's crew. Halsin wanted him to be seen by a healer."

Nettie takes an appraising look at him. She raises an eyebrow and says, "Well, I think about eight hours of sleep would suit you, for a start. Both of you."

You suddenly feel very grubby, remembering that the battered, grimy outfit you're wearing consists of Nettie's hand-me-downs. You certainly did not get eight hours of sleep. You haven't for a while.

"I need to help guard the ramparts," you say. "The goblins are on their way."

"Again?"

"Worse than last time. And their leader's coming."

"Moradin's hammer," sighs Nettie, like a dwarf, only her face is so beardless you're sure she's a halfling. "At least ye came back."

She ushers Liam onto her stone medical table, much to his embarrassment. She searches through her herbs and potions, selects a bottle, and hands it to Liam.

"Drink," she commands him, then returns her attention to you. "The leader of the goblins, is it? I'm just glad Halsin is back. Where is he now?"

"He's talking to Zevlor. He said he'd follow us – do you want me to get him?"

"No need." Nettie gives a small wry smile. "He knows where I am. Thank you – sincerely. Now, let's have a look at you..."

Liam gives you a helpless look. You step through the open doorway to Halsin's laboratory, leaving Liam to be fussed over in private. It seems a preferable alternative to waiting with all the druids.

The arcane door grinds shut behind you. You regret your decision immediately. you turn around and remember there's a dead body in here.

The dead drow is only partially covered by a sheet. his face is exposed, his eyes thankfully shut. The body must be magically preserved in some way, judging by the fullness of his face. He looks as though he might just be sleeping.

Your mother's victims didn't look like that. She wouldn't have bothered...

You look away from the dead man. There's a gentle tapping sound, which you track down to a large glass jar sitting on one of the shelves, where the mind flayer tadpole is still floating.

You hold the jar in your hands, frowning at it, watching the swollen maggot-like parasite floating around and gnashing its mouthparts.

The tadpole in your head is easier to forget about now that you've had it for a few days, but when you touch the glass, you can feel the tadpole in the glass jar resonating with the tadpole in your skull.

The presence at the back of your mind squirms eagerly, and you feel a strange, distant urge to open the lid and set the tadpole free.

You stave it off by taking the jar and shoving it into the Bag of Holding.

This is dangerous, you think to yourself. *I can keep it safe.*

You push the jar out of your mind and walk back to the dead drow, feeling guilty now that you've got his mind flayer worm stuffed in your bag.

He's young, his grey skin untouched the lines of full elf adulthood. You recognise him now as probably being one of Minthara's entourage, no doubt sent here by the Absolute to find the artefact.

You look him over, humming thoughtfully, wondering who he was, and if he asked for his fate any more than you asked for yours.

"How did you even die?" you murmur, standing over him.

The corpse's eyes open, glowing necromantic green. It lurches into the air with a burst of magic, opens its mouth, and croaks, *"Druids killed me."*

This time you make the connection between the thoughtful humming and the subsequent magic. You sigh.

"Who were you?" you ask. "Where are you from, what were you doing here?"

"Ned'Cirannis... Menzoberranzan... Scouting mission."

None of that surprises you. You look at the empty, glowing, dead face of Ned'Cirannis. "How did you end up in a situation like this, huh, Ned?"

The corpse has nothing to say to that. It collapses, dead, back onto the table, a silent cadaver once more.

"No, me neither," you say.

Ned'Cirannis was handsome, before. Someone has combed his alabaster hair back from his face. perhaps it was him, styling his own hair in life, but perhaps it was Halsin, tidying the corpse after death. Certainly someone stitched his wounds and washed the blood from his skin after they killed him, a measure more respect than Minthara afforded you.

You barely notice the door grinding open, lost in your thoughts.

"I wish we could've helped him," says Nettie, seeing you standing by Ned's body. "Truly."

You don't doubt it. Good healers are usually bad killers.

"It was self-defence," you say, "Wasn't it?"

"It was," says Nettie. "But – it was that tadpole in his head controlling him, wasn't it? He wasn't like you. He didn't know it was there."

"You couldn't have cured him anyway," you say. "Halsin said he couldn't remove them without killing us."

Nettie's voice is soft and thoughtful. "I know," she says. "He told me they kill the host if tampered with. It's the strongest enchantment they have."

You're caught off guard.

"He said that?"

Nettie pulls the sheet over the dead man's face. She doesn't look at you.

"Halsin made me promise, when he left," she murmurs. "If I met another infected victim, I was to find a merciful way to end their life. There was no other way."

The thought that pops into your head is tired and dispassionate: *Well, if she's about to do it now, I suppose I can probably kill Nettie in a fight to the death.*

"You didn't do that," you say.

"No," says Nettie. "It didn't seem right. Halsin's not half as clever as he thinks."

As though on cue, the stone door slides open again. Liam stands there, face awkward, as though he has bad news. Floating in from the chambers behind him, you hear the distinctive sound of senior druids screaming in rage.

Liam is too infirm, and Nettie is too timid. You have to be the one to scurry ahead and see what's going on.

Even more druids have crowded into the central chamber since you left it. Clusters of whispering druids stare at the centre of the room, where Halsin is being shouted at by a small throng of Kagha's angry supporters. Kagha is not with them, or angry - she's off to the side with her head down and tears silently rolling down her face, Rath standing protectively between her and the argument and looking extremely stressed.

A half-elf, one of the senior druids who's always here, is shouting in Halsin's face.

"Are you mad?!" he screeches. "Armed combat, on *our* sacred ground?! Using *smokepowder*?! One of mankind's most abhorrent pollutions! We are *druids*!"

Next to you, you hear Nettie gasp. Halsin has the decency to look ashamed.

"Extenuating circumstances call for extenuating methods," says Halsin. "To preserve as many lives as possible—"

"—you would take the Oakfather's landscape and *poison* it?! Is that it?!"

"Halsin, there must be another way," pleads Rath. "Our order stands for the preservation of nature and the maintenance of balance. Destructive tools of war – they go against everything we stand for. Isn't there another way? Can't we protect them with our magic?"

One of the other senior druids scoffs, a ruddy-faced halfling man you've never seen outside the inner sanctum.

"Why should we protect them at all?! Housing refugees is all very well, but we're not soldiers, we're druids!" The halfling complains. "We safeguard the natural state of the land. The goblins were here first, and they're stronger – what is that, if not nature?"

Halsin says, with naked desperation, "There are families among the refugees – *children*! Is it not the way of nature that we protect the young?"

"It is the will of nature that we protect *our* young!" snaps the half-elf. "Not the young of any city-dwelling vagabonds passing through!"

"Halsin," says Kaga, "For us to wage war..."

Halsin whirls on Kaga.

A noticeable ripple goes through the room.

"*Silence!*" Halsin snarls. "You are lucky to be standing here, a novice druid once more, and not an exile with the Shadow-Druids. You have tried the very limits of my mercy today, Kaga – do not exhaust my patience by speaking out of turn!"

Halsin must not lose his temper very often, because the druids are staring at him like he's sprouted a second head. Kaga shrinks back, but the senior druids bristle defensively.

"Why should she not speak? It's the truth," says the half-elf. "You want us to risk our lives for the very people who destroyed the Idol of Sylvanus!"

Halsin narrows his eyes. "I am asking you to *defend the gate*. It is our home – our territory!"

The half-elf scoffs. "That territory *used* to be ours. You gave it to the tieflings!"

"As *sanctuary*, as demanded by the Oakfather!" growls Halsin.

"And does the Oakfather not ask that we let nature take its course?" says the halfling. "It is not our role to interfere with the goblins and their affairs. If they wish to search the caves for some weapon, let them – we have no quarrel with them, if they'll leave us be."

Halsin's eyes dart to Nettie. Nettie, standing by your side, slowly shakes her head.

"I'm sorry, Halsin," says Nettie. "Things have changed. You *left*."

That gets to Halsin, in a way the others didn't.

You see the realisation pass over his face.

Halsin says, "I–"

A single note booms through the air, echoing through the stone chambers. The sound is low and melancholy, and it digs at your stomach, setting your nerves on edge even before you realise what exactly the sound echoing through the grove is.

The druids know it immediately – they turn, as one, in the direction of the gate.

"That's the war horn," says Rath. "The goblins must be here."

Your palms itch in anticipation of danger.

"What? No," says Halsin. "There's –"

"More gnolls, maybe," says the halfling.

"No, there are no gnolls," you say. "We didn't think the goblins could get here in time..."

"Either way, there's something approaching," the halfling says. "We should gather the apprentices and seal the door."

"And the refugees?" asks Rath.

A voice from the watching crowd murmurs, "There's no room."

"They have soldiers," another agrees.

"Let the devil-bloods fight," says the half-elf. "It's been long enough."

"Archdruid Halsin?" says the halfling.

For a long moment, Halsin doesn't speak.

The druids don't move. Funnily enough, despite everything, the senior druids are waiting for Halsin to issue the first command.

He draws in a sharp breath through his nostrils. The other druids must see something in the gesture that you don't, because all of them flinch like he just flipped one of the stone tables.

"I see," says Halsin quietly. "I would be no Archdruid, then, if I ordered you to fight against your will. I am your leader. Standing with you is my responsibility."

You begin, "Halsin..."

"Never mind," says Halsin. "I resign."

There's a little moment of shocked silence. The halfling and the half-elf go from indignant to horrified.

"You *resign*?" says Kagha.

Halsin calmly rolls his shoulders. "*You* will remain a novice. Rath will act as archdruid on a temporary basis – Rath, prepare a Sending for Francesca of the High Forest, and tell her I accept her offer from last year after all. Nettie, stay here and look after Liam – see him rewarded for his heroism. Come."

He turns away, and it takes you a moment to realise that this final command is directed towards you. You scurry after Halsin as he takes rapid long-legged steps away from the other druids without a glance back, leaving an air of bafflement in his wake.

"Halsin!" You cry, following him to the chamber's exit. "What are you doing?"

As he passes through the inner circle's stone threshold, Halsin arches his back, spreads his palms, and releases a crackling pulse of druidic magic.

His form melts and reforms, his voice warping with transmutation as he speaks.

"What is right," he growls.

He twists and splatters into the shape of an enormous, yellow-fanged brown bear. Even on all fours, the scarred, hulking grizzly bear that is Halsin stands taller than you. Druids stare at you and gasp.

Keeping up is a struggle, You wheeze, "But what about—"

"We have run out of time." Halsin's voice sounds the same to you, but slurred, gravelly, as though drunken – more beastlike. "If there is to be slaughter, I will not stand idly by."

"The smokepowder! What about the smokepowder?!"

Halsin looks at you, ursine eyes wild, and an instinctive spike of fear shoots through your body.

"Keep it. We will fight without it!"

You're severely outnumbered by the goblins. You don't have the advantages of explosive weapons. Still Halsin takes off, charging towards the gate with an angry bellow, barrelling past druids fleeing in the opposite direction.

You struggle to run after him, ducking and weaving through the crowd. You can't afford to be crushed. The afternoon is rapidly filling with many other, more meaningful ways to die.

For a moment you think you've lost him. Then a large, sharp, toothed set of jaws clamps around the back of your vest.

Halsin – the bear – picks you up in his mouth, swings you into the air, and roughly tosses you onto his enormous brown-furred back.

You scream. Halsin ignores you. He breaks into a run, leaving you clinging to his back with one desperate hand; the other you keep tightly clamped around the bag full of catastrophic explosives.

For the sake of your sanity, you don't remember much of the bear ride.

The refugees laugh when they see you and Halsin galloping past. They might as well. There's not much else left to smile about.

When you arrive at the ramparts, you can already see the shifting shapes and rising smoke of the goblins assembling their forces in the distance. Through the trees you catch glimpses of goblins and wargs, waiting tight-packed together for the order to advance, hungry for bloodshed.

Zevlor's refugees-turned-soldiers stand in formation at the walls, armed with plundered goblin-bows and scimitars, staring warily at their attackers in the distance. Dammon, the blacksmith, stands next to the war-horn with a spyglass and his tail wrapped nervously around his leg.

At regular points of the boundary wall of dirt and druid-stone, your friends stand, their faces set, watching the goblins draw nearer. They look not unlike how they were when they won against the goblins the first time.

Rolan, Lia, and Cal are here too, looking more like frightened civilians than adventurers now that battle is looming on the horizon. They guard the wall's edges with obvious unease. Zevlor has, strategically, placed all the adventurers he has between the line of fire and his people.

A sparkle of light reflects from a spyglass, where a grey-skinned, armoured figure that must be Minthara stands atop a grassy knoll. This was the strategic point Halsin wanted you to blow up, presumably. He was right. They used it.

Zevlor stands by the portcullis wheel, face stern and unreadable. Halsin shakes you off at Zevlor's feet.

If Zevlor is surprised to see you riding a bear, or that the bear is Halsin, he doesn't show it.

"The other adventurers are guarding the wall," he says. "Your cleric isn't here. Are you a healer?"

"I can be," you say. It's almost true.

"Good. Stay out of sight, but within earshot of the battlefield." Zevlor is a traditional strategist. That's the classic battlefield position for a bard with no skills. "Archdruid?"

Halsin-the-bear stands on his hindlegs, glancing over the battlefield. He grunts, satisfied, and pads over to join Zevlor's side.

As a bear, Halsin has rough, greying fur, and the claw-scars on his face make him resemble an ancient war-beast. When he stands at Zevlor's shoulder, they look like the Coast's strangest knight and steed.

"People!" calls Zevlor.

His voice cuts through the expectant silence. His forces stare back up at him, waiting for his pre-battle speech.

His forces are humble, with or without you. Hungry tieflings in threadbare clothes grip their weapons with tight, frightened dignity. They have little else to defend themselves with.

Zevlor says, "You have fought all your lives. People named you *devilspawn* and forced you from your homes, your lives. But you fought, and lived."

He spreads his arms.

"Again the world has asked you to fight," he says. "And again, you have answered. You've come this far because you have more courage, more cunning, and more strength than they know. We are survivors! We will not be underestimated! Let's give them hell!"

He raises his longsword, and the assembled crowd cheers. There aren't many of you, but the curved cave walls of the Hollow make the sound bounce and echo into a chorus.

Dammon presses his lips to the gate's ivory war-horn and blows a booming command: *fire*.

One of Zelor's lookouts knocks, draws, and fires an arrow towards the advancing force. A goblinoid jeer rises up in response, and a volley of goblin-arrows fire wildly into the air and fall short of the ramparts, thudding into the dirt.

Karlach leaps on top of the wall, faces the raiders, and screams. Her engine screams with her, roaring like thunder, and sparks burst from her chest and shoulders as though her blood and sweat are catching fire in the air.

Whatever Dammon did to Karlach, it worked. You can practically feel the heat off her from here, the gleaming metal of her machine-parts glowing with heat. The air around her shakes.

Like a true devil from the depths of the hells, she throws back her head, her eyes and mouth leaking tongues of flame, and bellows, "*Let's fucking KILL THEM ALL, BABY!*"

The dam breaks. The spellcasters - Gale, Wyll, Astarion and his one firebolt - let loose their projectiles in one burst as the goblin archers find their positions and start raining arrows over the ramparts, and the air is filled with flying deadly weapons. The killing starts.

Your orders are clear. You duck, hide, and watch.

A hardy goblin raider manages to scale the wall, duck an arrow, and lunge towards Zevlor with a scimitar. She's batted out of the air by a bear-shaped Halsin, whose sheer bulk is enough to beat her to the ground and snap her neck in two thick swipes. Halsin bellows angrily.

Gale draws his staff in a wide circle and calls out something. A burst of wizard-magic, and you recognise your own spell, *Feather Fall*, on the other end of the Weave. Karlach takes a running jump, her greataxe freshly-sharpened and gleaming, and starts turning goblins to gory parts.

Lae'zel stays at the ramparts, now with a set of handaxes at her belt, and starts throwing blades into the goblins. A refrain of screams tells you that her aim is pretty good. She doesn't draw her sword till the first goblin breaches the barricades, then she charges through and leaps into their ranks with the same hack-and-slash staccato that you've come to recognise as hers.

There's not much for you to do but hide and watch. Zevlor seems to be a capable healer, and on the far end of the battlefield you watch with horrified fascination as Wyll throws and accurately hits Lae'zel with a glass bottle full of healing-potion. Your magic doesn't seem to be needed right now. After all, nobody's died yet.

As you stare, you feel something cold and slimy flicker behind your eyeball.

Minthara's voice, clear and cold as moonlight, rings out between your ears.

Open the gate.

The burst of compulsion she sends into you is powerful enough to turn your head right around and stare at the portcullis wheel before you even know what you're doing.

Magic has a taste, a sound. This psionic stuff, the mind flayer's manipulation, is barely detectable. You swallow down your nausea and look around.

Zevlor doesn't seem affected by any kind of hypnosis. He alternates barking commands to his soldiers and words of divine magic, healing and warding off most of the goblins' smaller attacks.

You look for Minthara and find her standing in her vantage point, staring directly at you. The distant presence of her tadpole is like a cube of ice on the periphery of your brain.

You take her connection to you, seize it, and imagine yourself snapping down it: *Open the damn gate yourself!*

The door to Minthara's mind slams shut like a steel trap.

Here's an interesting fact you don't yet know: drow elves are born with natural magic that they can use, with training, to teleport short distances.

Another fact, which you don't yet know but correctly suspect in your heart, is that Minthara is absolutely deranged.

All you know is that there's an explosion of mist, and Minthara steps right from her lookout point in the distance into the spot directly in front of you. She wordlessly brings her mace upwards, nostrils flaring, pupils dilated with white-hot fury.

You shut your eyes and strum your lute. The Weave springs viciously back on her, as though eager for revenge.

Zevlor intercepts Minthara the exact moment she's about to brain you to death again. Her mace glances off his magical ward in a glitter of abjuration, and he drives her back with a shove, forcing her onto the backfoot.

Stepping back into the rhythm is like slipping from cold air to warm water. You play Zevlor's feint to the right, then the stab to the left. Minthara evades both narrowly, and cracks her mace against his ward like a battering ram all the while. Another goblin breaches the wall, and Halsin bats him back down again with a snarl.

You screech, *"You're outnumbered, Minthara! You shouldn't have come!"* Your voice echoes on the Weave and booms in her ears. She grits her teeth. Zevlor fights with the deep pounding

rhythm of the church-bell, the bass drum, the old soldier hardened through time, and her mace can't find a way past his longsword.

Zevlor still controls their footwork, and he advances on Minthara, driven forward by the beating music. Cal and Lia are trying to push their way to Zevlor, but they're being harried by a pair of wargs who've broken through one of the barricades.

You move with Zevlor, blocking Minthara's exit. Minthara has her back to you, her attention entirely on Zevlor. The dirk Dammon gave you is still attached to your belt, waiting to be drawn, and Minthara wears no helmet, no neck-guard.

You can kill her while she's distracted.

The weight of Zevlor's chainmail, sword, and years cost him. He hasn't slowed down yet, but he's gasping, sweating. Minthara is dancing around him, tiring him out, spending his magic.

You can kill her.

The wargs have knocked Cal off his feet, but Lia has stabbed one of them with a shortsword and the other is cowering while she screams. There's not much time now, Eve—

You dart towards Cal, away from Minthara.

"*Cal!*" You cry. "*Up, fast!*" You inject a needle of healing magic into the words, and Cal rolls, snatches his scimitar, and finishes off the second warg.

Your chance fizzles and passes. The music turns for Minthara.

Zevlor misses his next cue by just a hair. Too slow. Minthara slams his sword-elbow once, twice, and then *crack*. He cries out.

Halsin roars, and turns away from the goblins he's keeping back from the walls. One of them grabs an arrow and drives it into his back, and he snarls, clawing his attacker away as more of them scale the wall and surround him.

Minthara knocks Zevlor's sword from his broken arm's grip. Zevlor closes the distance, moving inside the swing of her mace. Minthara's smaller, but faster. She wraps an arm around his neck, screams, "*FOR THE ABSOLUTE!*", smacks him with her palm, and blasts him with enough vengeful smite-magic to make white light explode from his eyes and nostrils.

Zevlor howls in agony. You snatch his sword from the ground. You hear the urgent beat of Minthara recovering from her own spellcraft, momentarily dazed. You could—

And you should—

"*Karlach!*" You screech, hearing the roaring of machine-parts close by. "*Help!*"

The sound responds to yours like the notes in a chord. You drop Zevlor's sword with a clatter as Karlach approaches.

There's a shuddering quake as Karlach leaps the wall and hits the ground, her engine growling like a rabid beast. When Karlach sees Zevlor lying there, bleeding from the face, she gives a wordless howl of rage and charges.

Minthara is smart enough to abandon Zevlor to choke on his own blood and dive out of the way before Karlach tackles her back over the other side of the barricade.

Karlach hits the ground where Minthara was just standing hard, scoring the ground where she lands, and snarls like an animal as she scrambles after Minthara, tail lashing in fury.

Minthara isn't small, but everybody's small compared to Karlach, and Minthara uses her smaller size to duck and weave around Karlach. Minthara doesn't even try to hit Karlach – it would be like hitting a pillar of earth. She just dodges for her life.

Karlach smashes the barricade, the paving-boards, shrugs off arrows and knives like they're mosquitos. Minthara's mace can't graze her, and Minthara doesn't have the magic to stop her. She dives for cover as Karlach smashes her greataxe into the portcullis.

You don't realise until too late that the gate is on fire.

It turns out that you don't need twelve barrels of smokepowder to blow up a druidic gate.

It turns out that smashing the entire gate mechanism in an explosive act of fiery rage is enough to collapse the entire pulley system, which sends the gate crashing to the ground, opening a huge, defenceless opening directly into the heart of the Hollow.

"Now!" Minthara screams. "Find that half-elf, and bring me the artefact! Take this Grove for the Absolute! *Charge!*"

It doesn't even hurt to realise Minthara planned this. A party of goblins you hadn't been paying attention to are dropping ropes and knives and pulling away the debris with planned precision. Your party are cornered away from the opening.

There's no time to stop the goblins storming the Grove.

In the shock that follows, Minthara leaps down and vanishes into her forces. You hear Karlach scream, wordless with rage, and throw herself at the nearest horde of soldiers.

Halsin collapses, his bear-pelt melting around him, and bursts from a splatter of wild-shape magic back into his elfin form. As a bear, he was bloodied and injured; now he's completely unscathed again.

You approach Halsin as he stumbles to get a better view and stares. He sees the goblins swarming the Hollow, and Minthara being buoyed away by her army, and his eyes go very blank and very hard.

The goblins rip through tents and ramshackle huts, spilling into bands of small raiding parties and shouting Goblinoid victory-cheers. Fires are already lighting.

"I can make this right," Halsin murmurs. "I must."

He draws a sickle from his belt and, with eerie calmness, walks to join the fray. He's in no rush. The clouds overhead are swirling into thunderclouds.

There he goes, walking into the losing battle. The odds are so stacked against him, you can hear them rattle.

Trying to be useful, you look for Zevlor and find a long, robust trail of blood. You follow it a little while, but you don't find Zevlor or his corpse. It turns to dribbles, then vanishes.

Trying to ignore the rising panic in your gut, you consider your options.

All the refugee fighters have scattered. Occasionally one will sprint across an open space or dart from a crevice, causing the goblins to jeer and fire potshots. There's no sign of Rolan, Cal, or Lia.

Your friends are regrouping on the other side of the gate, preparing to follow the goblins in and charge them from the rear. The goblins are already climbing up the ramparts, getting ready to assault from above. In a few moments, they're going to reach you, and then...

Then what? You're an untrained bard with a lute and a dirk you're not even holding and no spells left. There's nobody left to help you.

Except, when you concentrate—

"Quiet," whispers Shadowheart.

She's lurking in the darkest part of the shade, squatting. You can barely make her out. In the evening shadows, you can't tell if she's just obscured by the darkness or partially invisible. Shar is the kind of goddess who deals in both.

You say, "How long have you been—"

"Never mind," she whispers. "Come on, get behind me."

The evening shadows seem to surround her like a cloak. They sweep you up and embrace you, cold and clean to the touch, like a stinging medicine.

You say, "What are you doing here?"

"Trying not to be," she hisses. "There's a hidden passage under the wall. If you're asking why I'm saving your life – good question! Save it for later. We need to move."

The fighting is moving further into the Grove – the goblins have completely breached the Hollow's defences. Your friends have been retreating back further and further, losing ground and resources in a rattling, chaotic tumble.

Behind you, the rear of Minthara's forces are setting up on the now-abandoned ramparts – wagons pulled by rothé, she-ogres with handcars and catapults. Dror Ragzlin stands at the rear with a war-horn in one hand and two wargs at his side. He roars commands in Goblinoid, his gravelly voice booming across the Hollow to the goblins.

A goblin booyahg you recognize as Priestess Gut heals the wounded, who charge eagerly back into the fray. The healing-magic is flimsy – their wounds split back open and their limbs tremble as they fight. They don't seem to notice at all.

Everything seems very peaceful. Shar's magic isn't really a sound at all, but a gentle muffler on the sound of the Weave. Everything dampens as you follow Shadowheart along the edge of the battlefield, away from the fighting.

You climb past the remains of the gate. Nobody sees you, or responds to your presence, but the raiders shift direction away from you ever so slightly as you pass.

"Where are we going?" you ask Shadowheart.

"The caves," says Shadowheart. "There's a hidden door. Open it, and get the refugees out of there."

You nod. You don't resent being someone who needs keeping safe. You resent being an adventurer much more, when you think about it.

Set into the cliff face a short distance from the ex-gate is an overgrown patch of bare cliff face, which Shadowheart whispers to for a moment. The rock crunches, and a small crevice opens. Shadowheart would barely fit through. You shouldn't have any problems, though.

"What about you?" you ask.

"If I die," she says, "You can bring me back, can't you?"

"How did you--"

"My dream guardian," Shadowheart says, then corrects herself. "The artefact told me."

You can vaguely feel Gale collapse in pain somewhere, the first party knockout whistling in your ear as it approaches. Wyll is out of magic -- his touch on the Weave is as light and weak as a feather. They're trying one last push towards Minthara. You can already gently hear it failing.

"I can," you say. "But where are you...?"

"I have a plan," she says. "Give me the bag."

You spend a full moment reaching for your lute-case before realising she means the Bag of Holding.

"What?" you say.

"The one with the bombs. I told you, I have a plan."

You are silent for a moment.

"What?" you say again.

Shadowheart looks at you like you're very stupid.

"There's twelve barrels of Ironhand smokepowder in there," she says. "The guardian said so and your tadpole confirmed it. Stop gawking at me and hand the bag over! We don't have much time."

"Smokepowder barrels aren't weapons!" you say, ignoring the fact people are checking your psionic parasite like a broadsheet. "They're mining equipment. You can't just throw one at the goblins like it's a bomb."

"I have a better plan than that!" she snaps. "But in order to do it, I need you to get the refugees *out of these caves*. Get them as far away from the Hollow as quickly as you can! Go!"

"But--"

"Now!"

And she shoves you into the dark.

Your mother taught you how to look for traps. Thief-traps, like tripwires and pitfalls, but other kinds too. How to sense runes behind stone and crystal, the smell of firegrease and violet fungus.

She often taught you in the dark. First, when you were little, for fun. She'd hide runes in her basement and shut off all the lights, and give you a toffee for each one you could find.

Then, when you were older and she thought you were ready, she'd send you into the tombs. There wouldn't be toffees. You'd raid the crypt and, after, get drunk on Eluskan wine. You were fourteen.

Those strange memories float to you as you feel your way through the dark for Shadowheart's secret door. It's an old druidic-rune thing, its traps rendered harmless through age. You listen out until you can hear the danger, and then hum it to sleep, sliding open the door.

You creep through a chamber, then a long tunnel, then find a button-rune at the end, which opens a little cavernous doorway into Zevlor's office, where the survivors are huddled. It grinds open with a loud crunching, grinding sound, which saves you the bother of having to shout, *Hello! Down here, in the hole!* You weren't in the mood.

Bex and her husband Danis are treating wounds in a corner, where tieflings are nursing arrow and sword wounds. Okta dips aged, moth-eaten bandages in a basin of amber liquid and applies them carefully to Zevlor, who lies gasping on a mat on the stone floor.

They all look up, and a ripple of hope goes through the room. You wish you weren't numb to it.

"Follow me," you tell the crowd of pale, terrified faces. "There's a way out."

Elturel fell into the Hells. When it got back, it fell into chaos. The tieflings are very, very good at packing up their things and running in a hurry. Bex and Danis grab torches and light them, passing them out as people dart through the exit in small groups.

Mol and her orphans move in a pack, guarded by Alfira and another young woman. Alfira has her own lute in her hands, and she's bent down, whispering intently to a gaggle of the smaller kids. Alfira sees you, breaks into a smile, then hurriedly looks back and continues whispering. She ushers the kids through the passage, watching them like a hawk.

The refugees filter out. Okta gestures you over to Zevlor's side, her face grim. "Maybe you can help him," she says. "You've got magic, haven't you?"

You aren't sure. Your work protocol takes over. "Of course," you say. "I'll take care of it. You go ahead."

You look down at Zevlor. They've cleaned and dressed his wounds, but he's bleeding through his bandages, and he breathes raggedly, his skin paled to the colour of red clay. As a nurse, there's not much you can do. As a bard...

You struggle to make your fingers play the strings. The tiniest squeak of healing magic. You're almost completely out of spells. You fumble out the last note of a healing-melody, and put your lute aside in frustration, just like Alfira would. Some of the colour returns to Zevlor's face, but it isn't much.

Zevlor groans in a way that suggests he would be speaking if he could. He sits up, eyes still closed, and mumbles something in Infernal.

"Let me help," someone calls. You look up and see Dammon approaching, armed only with his hammer and a bag full of pegs. He spent most of the battle reinforcing the most important barricades, all of which have just become completely irrelevant with the gate open.

Dammon carefully props Zevlor up on his shoulders, unflinching as blood soaks through his bandages and onto his apron.

"I've got him," says Dammon. He clears his throat politely. "I've got you, sir."

Dammon seems deeply, unnaturally calm, not unlike a healer himself. Perhaps, in the Hells, he *was* a sort of healer -- a doctor for machines like Karlach's.

Zevlor pants, but he has enough Tavernsong magic in him to stay awake. Minthara's smite burst through his vessels, leaving him bleeding from most of his face. He wheezes, unable to speak, but he manages to open his eyes and incline his head to you in the slightest of nods.

You let them go ahead of you, taking up the rear. You give a last look over the empty cave.

It looks the same as any other part of the Hollow -- a big rocky place with cavernous walls and holes in the roof for sunlight. It occurs to you that the Hollow is really just a big cave network, just boulders and crevices and hollow stone. No wonder the druids weren't using it for anything except storing pilgrims they didn't want.

Out in the sunlight, the tieflings are regrouping. Down the road, in the bushes, a distance away from the Grove.

You leave them. You make yourself small and creep back towards the gate, to the place where you last saw your party. You're completely out of magic, and with that, the Weave might as well be nonexistent. You can't sense or hear a thing.

You climb up the mound where Minthara once stood, where Halsin planned to trigger his explosion and wipe Minthara's army off the map before they even launched their attack. It seemed very realistic at the time. Now you're not sure.

The battlefield is empty of living fighters. There are bodies, still lying where they were cut down. Scorch-marks, maybe from Karlach. You hide, look towards the gate, and wonder what Shadowheart is up to.

It does, to be fair to Shadowheart, become obvious.

Smokepowder is mining equipment. You can't *really* use it to blow up an army. Halsin's plan to conceal them here and set them off from a distance might not have worked at all. It might also, looking at all the caves and tunnels you've seen, have worked *too* well. An explosion near the gate might have damaged it. After all, it's pretty frail already.

The first explosion sounds. It's somewhere a little into the Hollow, behind the fallen gate, the rampart. There are goblins guarding the gate, but when they hear the second explosion -- louder and closer than the first -- they go running towards the rest of the army, abandoning their posts. You creep closer.

The Hollow is almost impossible to access without the gate. It's surrounded on all sides by natural walls of stone and dirt. One of those walls overlooks the refugee encampment, lined with grass ledges and thick underbrush, and when you hear the third and fourth explosions -- one after the other very fast, in two different places -- you hear a great loud rumble somewhere deep within it.

You creep through the gate. You climb up one of the rampart ladders. You stare.

A mines-raised dwarf would probably be able to tell exactly how it worked, and why. The way the dirt walls were shifting and swelling, slowly, and then faster. Cracking, rumbling. Something to do with caves, and mining equipment.

The rocks shake loose. The soil spills like water. You think to yourself: *Shadowheart is either very clever or very stupid. Maybe both.*

You watch the entire cliff overlooking the Hollow collapse, enveloping everyone inside.

Later, after you've both had three glasses of wine at the tieflings' celebratory party, Shadowheart justifies it to you like this:

The winner of a battle isn't the side who kills the most enemies, like it's a sport. The winner is whoever stays standing when the fighting stops. So she stopped the fighting.

A small handful of the goblins are still left standing in the wreckage, but none of them have tadpoles. Without any psionic influence, they drop their weapons and run when they see you.

Your friends are wonderful and stupid enough to have all gotten smashed while grouped in about the same place. Nobody's soul has even left their body, they're just grievously injured, so all Shadowheart needs you to do is point out where they are so she can dig them out and heal them before they die. It's a resounding success.

The Hollow is completely ruined. It's a mess of broken stone and dirt, the dust still filling the air. You look for Halsin, finding only dead goblins, or living ones who run as soon as you free them from the rubble.

You don't find Halsin. You find Minthara lying on top of a pile of bloodstained rubble with her eyes closed, wheezing.

You don't have your lute. You're completely out of juice, anyway. But the short-bladed dirk that Dammon gave you is still at your belt.

Minthara's eyes flit open at the sound of you climbing over the rocks to approach her. Wordlessly, too injured to speak, she groans.

You draw the dirk. Minthara watches you. Her eyes narrow, even as her chest heaves. She glares.

You raise the blade the way that they taught you, all those years ago. Minthara's brow softens. She closes her eyes.

Now.

You hesitate, poised to strike. I put my hands on yours, steadying them. For a moment, we are very close. You breathe in my presence. You recognize me.

The blade clatters against the rocks as you drop it. You kick it into the debris; it vanishes. You stand over Minthara.

"Get up," you say. "You're beaten. You have nothing. Don't come back."

She wheezes in a breath. Then another. Then she opens her eyes, Lolth-red and filled utterly with hatred.

"Do not..." she hisses, "...pity me."

What a Menzoberranzan thing to say. You roll your eyes.

"I didn't ask you," you say.

You leave her there, bleeding.

You don't, as instructed, pity her enough to turn back. But when you look later, she's gone, with only a large pool of blood left behind.

They fire Halsin.

He's very good, really. He takes responsibility for the whole thing. He hasn't even met Shadowheart, but he fully claims the entire thing was his idea, and that he masterminded the entire thing. It's fortunate, really, because judging on previous behaviour, the senior druids would probably have executed Shadowheart with a snake.

Halsin doesn't even get exiled. He just gets very politely asked to leave and not come back for a while. He comes back with a blank look in his eyes and, distractingly, two very large barrels of blackberry wine tucked under each arm.

Halsin takes you to the adventurer's campsite. Your party, the tieflings, and Halsin all. It's the only part of the Grove that Halsin is now permitted to enter or use in any way.

Zevlor is back on his feet, and only hobbling very slightly. Halsin is really a very excellent healer. When Zevlor's people are ready to move again, he calls out to them:

"Tomorrow, we set out for Baldur's Gate. The roads will be safe for us. Archdruid Halsin has agreed to guard our caravan. That is tomorrow - tonight, we feast!"

There's a ragged cheer from the tieflings. Halsin says, quietly, "I am no archdruid." But nobody replies.

Chapter 14

You join the refugees and a handful of druid volunteers as they comb the front of the gate. On the blood-soaked grass, you form two piles – one for the goblins, one for the tieflings. Then you start to drag the bodies.

The work is simple and extremely unglamorous. You clear up the worst and bloodiest of the rubble, help up the injured, and loot the dead. You get to keep the loot from both sides, because you won. You politely ignore the goblins as they come back for their dying.

It isn't surprising that they don't linger on this stuff in the *Illustrated Adventures of Balduran*. It's definitely unromantic that the other side is also here doing the same thing. The goblins' noncombatants are mostly kids and juveniles, though at one point when you're carrying a sack you have to avoid awkward eye contact with a bugbear carrying the body of Priestess Gut.

When it's all been picked clean, Okta claps you on the back. Nobody is new to bloodshed, but Okta is old and cheerful and wise in a way that you only get by witnessing so many tragedies it stops feeling strange. In a way, now that the battle's over, she's as important here as Zevlor was while it was going.

"That's everything," she says, "And nobody lost a son, daughter, or family. Tymora must've sent you to help us."

You think of Withers and his skeletal wisdom. If a god sent you to help the refugees, you're not entirely convinced it was one of the pretty ones.

Most of the druids respectfully peel away, but Nettie walks with you as you tromp back to your camp by the river. She stays quiet as the tieflings start to laugh and joke, letting off their tensions, and walks alongside you.

The sun has fully set, now. You watch the stars start to appear overhead.

"I spoke to Halsin," says Nettie, eventually. She doesn't look at you. "He's still with the injured, I think, healing folk."

The words are soft and awkward. She sounds like they're spilling out from off of her chest.

"What did he say?" you ask.

She pauses. "He said he was sorry," she says. "I wish he wasn't leaving."

You feel a wave of pity for the young apprentice, alone in the enormous druidic laboratory.

"Can't he stay? Is there no way?"

Nettie smiles sadly. "I'm sure he could, if we really pushed," she says. "But it wouldn't be right. Halsin was a good Archdruid, but he wasn't happy. I think he was mainly here to make sure nobody worse wasn't."

You consider what the Grove would look like after fifty years of Kagha's leadership. It's probably good that Kagha, who reverts to child-killing after a few weeks of pressure, has now been disqualified.

"Why was he Archdruid, if he wasn't happy?" you ask.

"The old Archdruid was Halsin's master," says Nettie. "He was killed suddenly, a century ago, and there was nobody to take over but Halsin, his appearance. He said he didn't want that to happen to me..."

You consider the image of Halsin standing over the battlefield, the haunted look in his eyes. You can imagine a shy peaceful healer like Nettie, a hundred years younger, being told they're in charge and never relieved of it.

"Will you be alright, now that he's gone?" you say. "What'll happen to you?"

"I'll get by," she answers, shrugging, and turns it back on you. "What about you? Have you found anywhere to go, for the mind flayer tadpole?"

You'd almost forgotten about it being a parasite ready to eat your brain. It just feels like another set of magic powers, when it's not squirming.

"The githyanki have their own healing device," you say. "Now that the roads are clear, we can go there. Lae'zel says they can cure us."

Nettie nods. "They have secrets about the illithids that nobody else does," she says, "And they're very advanced, with their technology. They'd know the most about curing you."

She's saying it more for your benefit than because she means it. You appreciate it, though.

"How's Rath?" you ask.

She thinks. "When he heard the news about the Hollow," she says, "He turned into a wolf and went for a lie-down. I haven't seen him since."

"Oh. He probably needs the rest."

"He does." She agrees. "Everyone else has started fighting about Franchesca taking over as the new Archdruid. She's been begging to come take over for years, but always Halsin said she'd never be able for Kagha."

"Will they accept it?" you ask. "An outsider taking over the Grove?"

"They didn't like Halsin nearly as much," she says, "And they wouldn't dream of getting rid of him. They'll settle down. It'll all go back to normal, soon... Halsin did a good job setting it up like that."

The camp comes into view. It's already thronging with people, lighting up with torches and cookfires and the colours of living. Tieflings and adventurers, refugees searching for safety, bedding down for another night.

Nettie pauses as she sees it. It must look too much like civilization to her, because she shrinks a little, hanging back. The refugees cheerfully call out to her, and she waves shyly, saying nothing.

"I hope he writes to me," she says. "I want to know how it ends. And I won't know where he is."

From a bad-smelling corner of your memory, Auntie Ethel says: *Your adventure will end in chaos, destruction, and death. And your story, Eve, ends in the most devastating murder of all.*

"If I get back home," you say, "I'll send you a letter."

She smiles. "I hope you do get back home," she says. "I hope you get your cure... Balance keep you."

She touches her wrist to the oak symbol embroidered on her chest, and bows her head to you. Then she slips away, back into the darkness of wilds. Without a torch, and without casting a werelight, she simply vanishes.

"Eve!" someone calls, from the direction of the camp, and you move forwards. That's all you can ever really do, when the world gets more complicated: update the journal of your mind, and move forwards.

Your campsite has been transformed into a noisy, crowded, boisterous micro-community of very relieved people. Already a kitchen and bar area is forming. Okta has taken over the mess area and is happily frying slices of warg-meat and wild bacon in lashing of olive oil, while young helpfuls slice fruit and vegetables and bread at her command, glowing with the excitement of people who haven't seen real food in weeks. Your fellow party members have scattered, presumably because they're making room for the tents, wagons, crates, and sacks of just a bit too many people for the available space.

"When I get to Baldur's Gate," says a bright-eyed Alfira, "I'm going to make this story legendary. I'm going to call it 'the Battle of the Grove' and perform it in the Elfsong. Everyone will know it!"

You nod encouragingly. You don't have the heart to tell her they don't hire bards in the Elfsong tavern.

Alfira has already composed an entire verse about Shadowheart's heroism, and she makes it halfway through a second one before Shadowheart makes her stop.

"But this is *history*," says Alfira, which is a very bardic thing to say.

"You can write whatever songs you want," Shadowheart snaps, "Just don't put in any details about me or anything I did. Make something up if you have to."

"But the truth is already so incredible!" Alfira protests. "A whole force of goblins, a heist, a big twist... barely any casualties! For *tieflings*! It deserves to be remembered."

Shadowheart is extremely embarrassed to be paid attention to, which sucks for her, because she's attending a party in her own honour.

"Leave off, Alfira, put me in the song instead," says one of Alfira's friends, a sharp-horned young woman who escaped the battle with barely a scratch. "Nobody wants a story that's true, anyway."

She pulls Alfira towards the centre of the party. Alfira has been with the kids most of the day, escorting them from hiding-spot to hiding-spot. It doesn't seem to make a dent in her stamina. When Zevlor calls for music, she comes alive, bouncing up on her jingling boots and grabbing her lute with a smile, and selects a small flat boulder for her stage.

Rolan, the wizard, summons up sparks of light to dance around her, which earns a few *oohs!* and some playful jeering from his siblings. Alfira fills the air with the cheerful, jaunty notes of a polka half-written in Infernal as fellow partygoers cheer and clap.

The children start a dancing circle, and Bex drags Danis into it too, people laughing at them and with them both. Alfira lights up at the attention, the dazzle.

Zevlor stands off to one side, still partly dressed in his armour, back straight and rigid.

"I can't tell you how good it feels to see these people smiling," he remarks to you. "I'm sure you'll be hearing it plenty tonight, but... thank you. It's a long way to Baldur's Gate yet, but at least now we have a chance."

He looks more tired than anything. People regularly approach him with drinks, which he declines. It's funny to think that a man so steely and competent as a commander is such an awkward partygoer.

"I'm sorry we can't come with you," you say.

"You've already done plenty," Zevlor says.

"Maybe a bit too much, with the state of the Grove now," you admit.

Zevlor waves that one off. "We lived. As far as I'm concerned, it was a victory as stunning as could ever be seen," he says. "Everyone else feels the same, I'm sure."

They do, judging by the dancing. You nod.

"Put it out of your mind," says Zevlor. "This is an evening for celebration, not contemplation. Go, have a drink! Mingle! You've earned a night of relaxation, truly. All of you have."

Zevlor says it like he's the only one who hasn't. He waves you away, smiling, but the exhaustion in his eyes is deeper than ever.

Alfira finishes one of her pieces, and in the pause for clapping she looks over at you.

"Have you seen the other bard?" she asks in excitement. "The author? We were just talking, we're going to play a duet later tonight! You'll join us, won't you?"

You realise Volo must be floating around somewhere and immediately head towards the alcohol, disgusted.

Shadowheart and Astarion have formed a private collection of bottles in their own corner. They sit just a little out of earshot of the crowd, muttering together over tin goblets of wine. They generously ignore you as you help yourself to some of their stash.

"Never thought I'd be toasted as a hero, I must say," says Astarion. "Never thought I'd find myself *saving* lives, instead of taking them."

"How does it feel?" says Shadowheart.

Astarion takes a leisurely sip of wine.

"Awful. I hate it." He nods. "We should've sided with the goblins. I'm sure they were more interesting, at least – this is *pathetic*. Look at these wretched people."

"We're quite wretched people," you remark.

"Oh, it could be much worse." He waves a hand. "At least we're not refugees. They don't even have mind control! I just wouldn't bother living."

You take a sip of your wine. It's proper red wine, with proper Chondian grapes. Presumably, Astarion stole this from goblins, who stole it from the inn... Well, that's economics in the countryside.

Shadowheart gazes at the party. Alfira is playing music to a freshly-built bonfire, coaxing it into a roaring blaze with her magic.

"It does feel strange, playing the hero," Shadowheart says. "And yet... we came through for these people. The world is a little different now. It's gratifying to think about."

"*That* I understand," says Astarion. "Finally... influence."

Shadowheart nods.

"Finally, influence." She repeats the words with relish. "And it's *mine*."

Alfira plays the last flourishing note of her song. The bonfire crackles, releasing a magical puff of multicoloured sparks. Alfira's little audience hollers.

"I never thought I'd find myself caring for vulnerable people like these," says Shadowheart. "It's not Lady Shar's way."

You study Shadowheart's face. She doesn't look regretful, just thoughtful. The light dances in her eyes.

Astarion says, "Yes, she's more the *everlasting torment* sort of god, isn't she. Have you committed some kind of sin?"

"Don't be silly, Astarion." You speak up, feeling protective of Shadowheart and, by extension, Shar. "Shar's followers are *famous* for mass destruction. The Lady thrives on it. She's hardly going to mind if some refugees get saved in the process."

Shadowheart scowls at both of you, even though only Astarion was being offensive.

"That isn't— Look, it's not *everlasting torment*," she says.

"Oh, here she goes," Astarion mutters.

"Nothing lasts forever except *nothingness*. Torment ends. *Everything* ends. That's the *point*. You wouldn't understand!"

"I'm sure we wouldn't," you assure her.

Shadowheart is still going. Her braid dances. "Everyone thinks Shar is evil, but they're wrong. It's about exposing lies and ousting heresies. If Shar was evil then she wouldn't have guided me today, and she *did*."

Astarion turns to you, away from Shadowheart. He says, "Who knew Shadowheart would start getting into *politics* after two glasses of red? Sharran ethics. How *fringe*."

You sweat. "I wouldn't know anything about that," you say. "The sages at the Unrolling Scroll just pay me, they don't tell me anything."

Shadowheart has gone quiet. You worry that you've offended her terribly and she's about to unleash Shar's ultimate darkness on you two specifically, but when you glance at her expression she's suppressing a smirk.

"You're both ridiculous," she says, not without a trace of fondness in her voice. "Why don't you go and bother Gale? Astarion says you were whispering together this morning."

Astarion perks up. "Oh, I should offer Gale some wine. It might make him fun! He seems like the sort of man who has *terrible* impulse control."

You choose not to comment. Astarion produces another full bottle of red from his pockets and saunters away.

Shadowheart sips her own wine goblet with dark-stained lips. There's still a silver circle brooch pinned up in her braid, but the Sharran circlet she wore around her forehead is gone, packed away somewhere for the evening. She's cleaned herself off with magic, but her braid is still messy from the battle.

"Shadowheart," you say.

She crosses her legs and sits in the grass, bringing her closer to your height. She gives you a wary look, eyebrow raised.

"Where's the Bag of Holding?"

"Oh, that?" Her wariness fades. "I still have it. Why?"

"I need it back for tonight, please."

She shrugs and fetches it for you. The weight is gone from it entirely, and it hangs limp and grey and not magical-looking at all.

"I can't believe you were just running around with that bag full of explosives the entire time," she says. "Just because the druids forbade it. They're not exactly civilised, they were about to execute a ten-year-old."

"I haven't got a good imagination," you say. "It's a good thing you came."

"The artefact wants all of us alive, and it told me what you were doing. It wasn't difficult, really." She shrugs. Her unravelling braid dances behind her shoulders.

You think about asking Shadowheart more, but the sun has set and exhaustion is setting deep into your bones. You don't think you can handle much meaningful exposition right now.

"Well, everyone's very happy with it anyway, so you might as well enjoy yourself," you say. "Take care."

She nods. You feel her watching you as you take the Bag of Holding and wander the party, looking for Gale and Astarion.

You don't spot either of them immediately, but you do see Wyll, standing on his own by the riverbank.

He gives you a small smile as you approach.

"Ah, hells," he says. "I was hoping you wouldn't notice me here."

"I was just looking around. Are you alright?"

Wyll's eyes flit back to the river, where the moonlight is dancing peacefully over the water. The sound of the festivities is duller here, soothed by the running of water.

"I'll be fine," says Wyll, waving a hand. "Come morning, I'll be my normal self again, I'm sure."

There's an unspoken admission in there, and it compels you to walk over and stand with Wyll at the riverbank. You look up at him, studying his stone-and-crimson eyes, and he rubs the back of his neck.

"I'm not in a festive mood, to tell you the truth. I'd be poor company at a party like this." He gestures to his face with his newly-clawed hands. "Besides, who wants a devil celebrating in their midst?"

It feels like a very long time ago that Wyll was transformed. It's been less than a week. Not very long, when it comes to your species being altered.

"You're not a devil, Wyll," you say. "If anyone would understand that, it's the tieflings from Elturel."

He shakes his head. "I'm sure they would. But who would I be to ask them for their acceptance? I look like this because a devil touched me... Devils took everything from these people. Devils hurt them before they were even born..."

"Not you, though," you point out. "Are you worried what they'll think of you?"

"I'm worried what will happen to them," says Wyll. "It's too long to Baldur's Gate, and we can't help them."

You look up at him, about to chide him for overthinking, but the words stick in your throat. He reminds you too much of Noonan. Too much of your little brother in the slouch of his shoulders, the cadence of his voice. The grief hits you fast and strange.

"Sorry it has you feeling rough tonight," you say. "I've got to find Gale, so... I'll leave you to it."

Wyll nods silently. The moonlight glistens on his horns.

You chase the odd feeling in your stomach down with wine and continue hunting for Astarion and Gale. They don't seem to be with the tieflings.

It takes you a while, but eventually you find out why: Gale has re-pitched his tent in a quiet, secluded spot near the treeline, and Astarion is talking in his ear, hand on his shoulder, the two of them drinking together. Gale is looking cheerful but noticeably pale.

"Astarion, you shouldn't give Gale wine *then* drink his blood," you say, aghast. "That's cheap."

"What's wrong with being frugal? It's just a pity it didn't improve the taste." Astarion grimaces. "That orb in Gale's chest tastes like bile."

"No need to fuss! A sip or two of blood is a trifle, really. I can barely feel a thing." Gale has been furnished with a goblet full of wine already. He beams at you.

"Astarion, I need to talk to Gale for a few minutes," you command. "Get Wyll drunk instead. He's there staring at the river."

"Ugh, fine. I'm coming back, so keep Gale warm for me." Astarion sashays away.

You frown, wondering if Astarion is planning to seduce Gale or just bite him a second time.

Gale looks at you expectantly. He's sitting on a dusty little rug, his books neatly piled up in the corner, his face just a few inches higher than yours. In the dark, with his skin pale, the magic-scar on his chest and the swirls up his neck are visible in gentle glowing violet.

"Here," you say, and pull the Bag of Holding off of your shoulder. "Have this. You look... peaky." You don't say *hungry*.

You see him waver, about to refuse, but his desperation overtakes his manners. "Thank you," he says, takes it, and immediately presses it to his chest with a sigh of relief.

Even through Gale's robes, you can see the ultraviolet sparks and veins of the Orb as it lunges for the Bag of Holding. Greedy sparks of light tear the Bag apart, sucking power into the Orb's spell-scar, and as it fades to wisps of dust and mist the scar pulses cyan one final time. You can hear the magic gurgling away into nothingness in the Weave as Gale grinds his palm into his chest, gasping as the magic does its work.

At last the light fades, and Gale draws his hand away.

"If only it fully relieved the pain," he mumbles. "Every time, it helps less..."

When you give him a questioning look, he does a guilty start, like he'd forgotten you spoke Common.

"It helps enormously, of course," he says quickly. "I'm truly grateful."

"It's nothing." You squint. "Do you want to head back to the party? It's very dark over here."

Gale gestures, and a globe of soft warm light drifts out of his palm.

"I'd rather spend tonight with a book. I've had far too much sensory stimulation for today," he says politely.

You had a vision of Gale attending Waterdhavian balls, dressed in fine robes and making small talk with the Masked Lords of Waterdeep. "You're not good with parties? I imagined you were a bit of a socialite."

Gale laughs. "Once upon a time, perhaps. An ex-Chosen of Mystra now living in disgrace and obscurity, though, is not a popular party guest."

"What about your friends?" You read his face. "No... You didn't have any friends?"

"Plenty of colleagues. Mentors. Correspondents. That sort of thing." He sighs. "Friends... what few I might have had at the start, I drove away through solitude and secrecy. I imagine most have given up on me."

"That sounds lonely."

"A reclusive wizard, locking himself away in his tower... It's a classic. Alone with my books, with my familiar as my sole friend and confidant. Poor Tara," he adds wistfully, "I do miss her. Sometimes you remind me very much of her."

You say, standing on your dignity, "I remind you of your *cat*?"

He laughs. "Good gracious, Tara isn't a cat! She's a *tressym*." They're cats with wings. "I can't imagine what she'd say if she heard you say that."

"Excuse me. Your tressym."

"I was just a boy when I summoned her. She stayed by me through it all – helped me research my condition, found me objects." He smiles. "It's a favourable comparison, I assure you."

Tressyms can't usually talk, but Gale did tell you he was a talented child.

"She's always saying I should make some mortal friends," says Gale. "I think she'd approve of you." Then he clears his throat, embarrassed, and adds, "Not to assume..."

"Of course I'm your friend," you say. Gale puffs up immediately. "But if Tara's right, maybe you *should* go and mingle at that party."

Gale grumbles, "That's exactly what Tara would say."

"She sounds wise," you declare. "Maybe we *are* similar."

He smiles. "More than you know. Go on, Eve, enjoy yourself. I'll ask all about it tomorrow morning."

Unburdened by the Bag of Holding, you walk back to the warmth of the party. It's well into the evening, but the tieflings who fought in the battle are still drinking and eating, laughing off their tension.

Shadowheart is sharing her tent and alcohol with Karlach. Astarion near the dance floor, drifting from person to person with effortless grace. You spot Lae'zel eating cuts of grilled boar with some of the other young soldiers. She doesn't seem to enjoy social drinking, but she's embraced the eating culture of the Sword Coast like a natural.

You start heading towards her, but Alfira raises her voice over the applause and calls, "It's soon, don't forget!" to you, which means you have to talk to Volo. You decide to fortify yourself with another drink from Shadowheart instead.

Karlach cheers when she sees you coming. "There she is!" she hollers, red face redder with alcohol. "Oh my gods, Eve, I love you. I love Eve, Shadowheart. I love you too."

"You're drunk," Shadowheart laughs. She's not exactly sober herself.

Karlach looks good. There are gleaming, silver-coloured parts mixed into the medley of metals and studs in her chest, new parts made by Dammon. They've quietened her engine down to a constant, regular purr, free of coughing and smelling much less of smoke.

"How's the new upgrade?" you ask her.

"Good. Amazing. Really really good." Karlach grins. "Still hotter than a magma mephitis, so I still can't touch anyone, but... a lot less *explodey*. That's always good."

"You and Gale seemed cozy," says Shadowheart, wiggling her eyebrows.

"Astarion seems to have plans with him," you say. "Besides, Alfira wants me to play with her."

"I *knew* Gale would consent to being bitten eventually," sighs Shadowheart. "He's too curious."

"Someone was playing music by the river," says Karlach, pointing. "I thought it was you."

It's a dark night, but you see the unmistakable shape of a human with a feathered cap and a guitar-shaped instrument waiting for you in the shadows.

You trudge off towards the bank, dismayed at the idea of making any voluntary conversation with Volo.

The lone musician doesn't stir until you walk right up close.

"...Oh," you say, when they turn to look.

It isn't Volo. Their hat, hair, and jerkin are very similar to Volo's, but this is obviously a different human entirely. The instrument around the musician's shoulders that you thought was a guitar is actually a five-stringed yardling made of pale wood, the headstock bent upwards in a spiral curl at the top.

This human is also incredibly attractive. Their features are soft and beautiful, and they're middle-aged but so lithe and graceful you have to double-check if they have elf ears. You aren't completely sure if they're male or not.

They see you staring, and smile.

"Eve Tavernsong," they say. "It's lovely to finally meet you. I believe we may already have some friends in common. Weren't you once the matron at the boarding school in Baldur's Gate?"

They sit on one of the boulders, bringing them down to something like your level. You catch a glimmer of gold from their lapel.

You don't immediately recognise this musician, but you intensely recognise the crest pinned to their jerkin: the unrolling scroll. This bard is a worshipper of the Lord of Knowledge, then, and judging by the clothes and the yardling they're probably a bard.

...A proper bard, not a matron or a talentless minstrel like Volo. All devotees of Oghma in the Sword Coast eventually visit the Unrolling Scroll temple, but few take any interest in the staff of the attached schoolhouse round the back, not least the matron there. Nobody's ever heard of *you* before.

You feel a little shy.

"Um – yes," you say. "And... you're an adventurer? You had a tent by the river when we arrived, but we never met you."

"I'm afraid I had matters to attend to till now," says the bard. "But, my, haven't you been busy! You've been here just a few days, yet done so much. A shame. If only I'd been able to help you!"

You get the impression the bard is hiding a very tiny smile at your expense. They look as though they know something you don't.

"What have you been up to?" you ask.

"Oh, this and that... tidying up a few loose ends here and there, nudging bits and pieces into place. Nothing exciting. Primarily, I'm a bard watching the world pass by..." They gesture to you, smiling. "Much like yourself."

"Ehm..."

It was very easy for Evening Tavernsong, daughter of Sunrise Tavernsong, sole heir of the Lichnee-song, to act like a bard. It is much more difficult for Eve, who went to Provoss and did nurse training after, standing in front of a *real* bard travelling the Sword Coast.

"...I'm sorry, I never actually got your name," you say.

They wink.

"Forgive me if I don't share it – until very recently I was male, you see, and I'm still something new." They chuckle. "I'd like to attend this party as myself, and nothing more."

The admission surprises you only for a moment. Baldur's Gate is a very large city, and you've heard stranger stories. "Well, fair enough," you say. "What brought you here, then?"

"Tales, of course. What else? This landscape is littered with them... some of them you've experienced, and some you've only glimpsed, and some yet you shall never know happened in the first place." They wave a hand. "As is true for everyone here. Though *you* are at the centre of a very interesting one, hero."

You say, "What do you mean...?"

"After all, you saved all these lives." They gesture. "And it's such a long way to Baldur's Gate. Who knows what may happen next? You must have remarkable courage."

"Oh – my friends are the heroes," you say. "I'm just... a supporter."

"The best bards always are," says the human with the yardling. "You're doing wonderfully. Just look at all these smiling people. Each of them, a story! Stories of tragedy and hardship, heroism and survival! Isn't it so beautiful that they all get to live – to thrive! – for tonight, at least?"

They seem to mean it. Joy radiates from the words as they speak them. Then again, they could be drunk. There's a lot of booze going around.

"I suppose so," you say. "It's... nice to be useful."

"How do you feel?" asks the bard. "Now that this particular leg of your adventure is over, and the next begins – Proud? Apprehensive?"

You hesitate. "I don't know," you admit. "Relieved, I think. I'm just trying to get by."

The bard laughs. "Aren't we all? Magic, monsters, and the mistakes of men... all just a way to pass the time, you know."

Alfira ends her song, prompting a smattering of applause. She dives into the next, filling the air with the jaunty notes of *The Queen's High Seas*.

The bard watches her for a moment, and you gaze with them. They close their eyes in appreciation of the music, as though Alfira's tipsy lute-fingering techniques are the most precious thing in the world. Definitely drunk, you decide.

"She's a natural," the bard muses. "One of the great entertainers of the coast, by birth. She ought to go far."

"She's a good girl," you agree.

The bard thoughtfully pats their old snowwood yardling.

"She reminds me of myself as a young performer. Of course, it's been a very, very long time since then... Still, it's lovely when someone is just learning their craft. So much knowledge, yet to be gained – and the beauty of discovery made new again."

You nod.

"Yes," you say. "She's young. It's good to be young. I'm glad they all get the chance to do it properly, the young ones."

The bard smiles. "You're not done being young yet," they say, which is generous. "I'm certain the best is yet to come. Maybe even the worst, too."

"I hope not," you say.

"As do I! But the beauty of a happy ending is contained, after all, in the uncertainty of its existence. Will there ever be peace? *Can* there ever be peace? The only way to know is to listen to the end." They sigh wistfully. "That's the part of your tale that interests me especially – the end."

"Well, if I see you again, I'll be sure to tell you how it goes," you say. "Where do you work? I assume you're based in one of the temples to Oghma."

"Oh, I go where I'm needed," they say airily. "But you'll see me at the Unrolling Scroll in due time... or wherever it is that you might go when you're finished adventuring. I'll see you at the end of things, regardless, I assure you."

"You get around, then," you remark politely. "Someone told me you were an author...?"

"An author?" They laugh. "Not these days. They must have mistaken me for Volo. I'm a scribe."

"A scribe of books?" It's more common for scribes to be wizards, rather than bards. Wizards use a lot of paper.

The bard nods, and their salt-and-pepper curls bounce. They remind you intensely of someone you know, you're sure of it – but you can't put your finger on it.

"I just write the words. Someone else writes the tales." The bard smiles. "Would you like to know what my latest book is about?"

In your logical mind, you know that the bard is just rambling, a traveler at a party. But something about the question makes you prickle with anticipation, makes you pause before you answer.

"Go on," you say cautiously.

The bard looks away from Alfira, and back at you.

They gaze at you with perfect clarity. They aren't drunk.

"You. At this moment in time, you're one of the most important people in the universe," says the bard. "Now, what do you think of that?"

You stare up into the other bard's eyes. The corners of their eyes have the beginnings of crow's feet, lines of age. When the firelight hits the brown of their eyes, they glint gold at the backs, like a gleaming coin.

Their eyes look old. Their eyes look older than anyone's eyes you've ever seen in your entire life.

"Um," you say.

You don't hear Withers approach at all; you just turn your head a little and he's suddenly standing there where he wasn't before. Withers speaks and moves so much like an old man that it's difficult, even with his withered face and desiccated skin, to find him frightening. But when he appears – his dead face unreadable, his glowing eyes fixed on the mysterious bard, his rotten robes swirling around him – you almost scream.

"You are not meant to be here," says Withers. "There are rules."

The bard stays seated on the boulder. They don't seem surprised to see an undead, sentient skeleton addressing them at all. They smile indulgently, deliberating stretching out their legs comfortably.

"There aren't any rules against adventurers attending parties, you know," says the bard. "This party wasn't, last I checked, invite-only."

Withers says – with just a *hint* of a tone, in his dry, calm voice, to suggest he's unbelievably pissed off – *"It would cause the smallest amount of consternation if you left."*

"Consternation with whom, my necromantic acquaintance?" says the bard.

Withers says, *"You know of whom I speak."*

You get the impression that something very terrible is about to happen to you, if it hasn't already.

"If you like," says the bard. "I suspect there'd be a question or two for you as well as myself, though. Is that the sort of thing you want to explain? I find our jobs so much easier to do when our superiors don't ask questions."

You look around. Nobody is looking over at you. Nobody is reacting to the conversation at all. Nobody has passed by you, wandered by, for a little while. As though you were sitting in the dark, as though you were invisible.

"I am a servant only to the balance of all things," says Withers.

"I wonder how *balanced* those knucklebone dice of yours were?" says the bard.

You sense yourself intruding on something very ancient and terrifying, and take a couple of precautionary steps backwards.

"Stay!" says the bard, though they don't look away from Withers.

You freeze.

"Bear witness, Eve, and listen." The smile on the bard's face has taken a sharp, hard twist. "It's your job."

Paralysed, you stare at the bard's face. You mentally cut back the long hair, and add back in the missing beard, and regard the resulting visage with terror. You know that face. You've seen it sculpted on every floor of every building at the complex you work at. You've seen it painted and depicted in mosaic in dozens of different ways for decades. You've seen the yardling, the impractical armour, the salt-and-pepper hair, in every painting and tapestry and statue in the Unrolling Scroll.

Oghma – the Allknowing, the Lord Binder, Master of the Last Library, the God of Knowledge, and the patron deity of all bards – glances at you and winks.

You look desperately towards the party. Nobody is looking at you. Nobody is coming to help you.

You say, feeling your life rush away beneath your feet, "My Lord – "

"There are procedures to be followed." Withers speaks over you.

"There are procedures, certainly," says Oghma. "But if I desired a conversation with *you*, sir, I wouldn't come looking for you at a time and place like this. Listen carefully, Eve: I need you to deliver a message."

You are too frightened not to obey immediately. "To who?" you say. "How?"

"The message goes like this: I'm watching, and if *I'm* watching, you can be certain that I'm not the only one, nor by any means the worst." Oghma dictates the words not you, but to the night sky, ignoring the glare they're receiving from Withers. "You've been sloppy! I'll tidy up after you, but from now on, keep your head down until you're out of the light. And, most importantly... Do *not* harm my servant."

Oghma hesitates. They tilt their head down to look you in the face, the all-knowing grin still tugging their lips.

"Do you understand? I know you're listening through Eve's ears."

You say, "I don't–"

"That is enough," says Withers.

He raises a hand. For a moment, you are utterly terrified, certain that his patience has waned and you are about to be smote.

The skeletal hand only points away, though, into the darkness.

"Leave," Withers commands.

Oghma says, with mocking disappointment, "And I didn't even get to finish my wine."

Withers doesn't reply. He keeps his bony finger extended, his dead burning eyes devoid of any emotion at all.

Oghma stands up lightly, turns to you, and bows. The strings of their yardling vibrate with the motion, creating a quiet, disparate chord.

You turn back to Withers and find him looking back at you, the ire faded from his expression. At least, you think. It's hard to tell with the dusty, filigree-encased eyeballs that someone posthumously stuffed into his skull.

For the first time you wonder: whose body is this, with Withers walking around in it? Did he ever have his own?

When you glance back towards the boulder, there's nobody there. You and Withers are utterly alone, and always have been.

You rub your fingers together, waiting for the fear to leave your chest.

You say, more to yourself than Withers, "I'm not qualified for this, you know. I didn't choose to be here."

"Nor did I," says Withers. "Such is fate."

You sigh.

"What was I doing over here?" you ask.

"I do not know," says Withers. "Thou didst simply wander in this direction and ponder silently for a while."

"Oh," you say. "Was I... talking to someone...?"

"I observed no mortal but thou."

You glance around. The night is silent here but for the rushing of the water.

"Thou wilt have many opportunities to spend the night in contemplation," says Withers. "But very few opportunities to celebrate."

He seems to be encouraging you back to the party. You sigh.

"I suppose I'd better get back to it, then," you say, feeling unsettled.

Withers silently inclines his head. You step away. A strange, dreamlike feeling clings to you, one you can't quite shake; but Lakrissa hands you another goblet of wine, and Alfira pulls you onstage with her, and soon you forget that anything unusual happened at all.

Chapter 15

It's a good morning to travel. The sun is burning off the clouds, but the breeze is cool and the Chionthar Valley looks beautifully inviting. It's adventuring weather.

The Elturel caravan has already left. With Halsin guiding them alongside Zevlor, their chances of survival are practically soaring. You hope they make it.

Your camp is almost packed up. The others are all standing in a circle. You sit on the ground, waiting patiently for your friends to finish getting ready, and decide to start reading through some of the papers in your mysterious lute-case.

"I'd hear what the others say first," Shadowheart says, raising her hands.

"Are you *joking*?" Astarion exclaims. "That Netherese jack-in-the-box should be a blip on the horizon by now!"

"If there is an imminent risk of him exploding, then taking him with us is an unacceptable risk," Lae'zel nods. Unlike everyone else, she is not hung over in the slightest.

"And who would keep an unbelievable secret like that?" adds Astarion, like he's not a big fat hypocrite.

Gale is cooking breakfast with an expression like he might just give up and die on the spot. He does not look up.

"Gale is our friend," protests Karlach.

"We've come this far together," Wyll agrees. "Gale is a good man."

You tune them out and pick up an old, yellowing page.

It reads,

Dear Khalid,

There is little to report. The children are quite healthy, and Winthrop asks after you and J, as always. C's report arrived last week, but B has yet to contact me, or the message was lost on the route.

Imoen seems perfectly ordinary so far; she will likely be fine outside of the library's supervision. Conversely, the scribes detect a great potential in [REDACTED], as J suspected. He will remain here

as my ward, while Winthrop has volunteered to take in Imoen. C has been deciphering the cult's records, but was unable to discern nothing of Imoen's parentage, with no record of her among the tributes; we suspect her to be a child of one of the attendants, stored in the nursery with the other infants for convenience, perhaps. I confess my relief at Winthrop's intervention. I have some notion of how to raise a son, having been one, once; a daughter I would be woefully underprepared to rear.

██████ is perfectly silent. He observes the world carefully, rarely fussing or crying. Imoen cannot yet stand on her feet, but she babbles constantly, as though holding an imaginary conversation. Tethtoril petitioned to remove the children from Candlekeep, as I predicted, but his threats are perfectly empty, and at any rate, the senior scribes are growing fond of the babes. My charge to you remains, but I am reasonably confident the children will remain here until they come of age.

I confess, despite the danger and intrigue of our work, that I have never faced a task as daunting as that of the rearing of a child. ██████ cried all through last night, and Phlydia says it is because his teeth are growing in, and to remedy the pain I should dab whiskey about his gums. Whiskey! I had never heard of such a thing, and know not whether to trust it. This is the finest library in the Coast, Khalid, and would you believe that within these hallowed halls is contained not one dedicated shelf of books about the teeth of infants?

The remainder of the letter is almost entirely mundane. The writer describes at length the way the baby is growing faster than he expected, the chatter from the wet-nurse. It's a long, rambling letter between friends. The letter is signed,

Yours faithfully as always,

Gorion

Astarion is shouting, "He's already eaten our bloody Bag of Holding like a teething dog."

"You're the one who bites people like a teething dog," snaps Shadowheart.

"We'll never make it through the Underdark without a wizard," says Wyll.

"We're not going to the Underdark!" Lae'zel shouts. "I have my orders!"

Nobody's heart is in it. The stakes of the argument are so low you can hear the Weave catching on the edges. It's just a bad morning to have a parasite in your head, like usual.

You pick up the next page.

Another letter from Gorion to Khalid, dated several years later, says nothing new. Gorion frets over his ward's growth, wondering if the children are normal, if Candlekeep is a happy place for them to live. Again the page is scored with black ink where the second child's name has been censored.

Winthrop won't hear a word about the stealing. He says Candlekeep is a boring place for Imoen, and she gets lonely when [REDACTED] is at lessons. I say he's spoiling her rotten, although when I told Dreppin that, he responded that I wouldn't understand, having always been wet behind the ears as a boy. I have never heard such nonsense...

You pick up another, and it's very similar. They're all quite similar. Endless letters to Khalid. The children learn to speak and read -- Gorion's ward very quickly. Imoen has a talent for arcane language but prefers to run about the town, causing trouble. Her foster brother grows up into a studious young man who runs errands for the monks. Gorion anxiously begs Khalid for his advice when the boy's education begins, and again when he hits puberty.

More, growing less regular through the years. Lengthy updates about the children, the townspeople. Mostly the personal correspondence between two friends, with occasional references to shared work and colleagues, cities visited and battles fought.

You look back up.

"Detonating the Orb could even be a strategic opportunity, given the circumstances," Lae'zel is saying. "Many respected warriors of the Halls of Tu'narath have given their lives in smaller explosions. Even wizards."

"Thank you, Lae'zel," sighs Gale.

The fact he's handing out bowls of barley and broth is softening her up.

Astarion says, "Is Mystra going to be calling as well, then? Are you some sort of divine fugitive? You're the ex of a vengeful god."

"Astarion," you call, "Do you need a bite?"

"Why are you offering," he says, narrowing his eyes.

"I thought you might be less narky if you ate," you say.

He gives you a hung-over glare and a hateful, "Piss off."

That seems to be the last bit of discontent for the morning. Astarion stalks off. Breakfast moves on.

You return to the Bhaalspawn File. More letters...

Imoen is trained in the bow and shortsword. Her brother masters every weapon they give him within minutes, but he favours a pair of Kara-Turan blades that the wall guards unearthed from Artefact Storage.

The siblings sneak outside of the walls and pick smokeleaf, and steal illusion scrolls from the library and cast them on the ramparts – they sound completely ordinary, harmless childhood antics, despite Gorion's repeated anxieties.

Years and years, infancy to puberty. You read pages of details about the children, following them all the way to the cusp of adulthood, but none of the letters explain why you have the file or why Raphael wanted you to read it.

"Eve, aren't you hungry?" says Wyll.

"Just a moment," you say.

Wyll casts his eye over your papers. "More old letters?"

"Seems like it. I'm not sure."

The rest of the documents are disparate, written in different hands on paper of different ages. One elegant letter reads,

Dear Mr. Winthrop,

I write you on behalf of Miss Imoen of Candlekeep, who sends her regards from Baldur's Gate. She wishes to convey that both she and her sibling are safe and well-treated in the service of Grand Duke Jannath, and that her tutelage is progressing swiftly. Enclosed within is a token from the Jannath estate, at Miss Imoen's request, and she wishes for the following message to be transcribed within this letter: 'Bet you never thought I'd get a real job, so eat a shoe, Puffguts'.

That one makes you smile. It's written on once-fine parchment in a looping cursive, and unlike many of the other letters, it's got a date. 1368 DR, over a hundred years ago.

One of the pages is practically soaked in censor ink.

*I, TETHTORIL OF CANDLEKEEP, FIRST READER OF THE LIBRARY OF THE AVOWED,
DO HEREBY ACKNOWLEDGE THE BEARER OF THIS NOTE AS [REDACTED], [REDACTED]
OF THE [REDACTED], A CITIZEN OF CANDLEKEEP [REDACTED] BY [REDACTED] OF
[REDACTED]. BY THE LIGHT OF THE LORD OF KNOWLEDGE, I DECLARE THAT
[REDACTED] HAS BEEN GRANTED PERMISSION TO [REDACTED] [REDACTED]
[REDACTED].*

Great.

The final letter in Gorion's hand is written in a shaky, hurried script on creased scrap-paper.

K & J,

They're coming. If I die, I will send my ward to you. Meet at the usual location.

And a hastily-drawn symbol; a half-circle and a scratchy little triangle. It takes you a moment to recognise it as the crescent-moon-and-lyre of the Harpers.

You hastily fold the page in half when you do, hiding it in your inner pocket with the note from O, the one for "Tav".

A rubbing of a gravestone with Gorion's name. Died an old man -- assuming he was human, but Gorion Adrian is a human name. Someone has added a note that says, *We built him a mausoleum, but he deserved a temple.*

You take the journal. It's not overly large, but the pages are thin, almost razory. The faded ink still means nothing to you, and the diagrams and drawings are just as incoherent as they were yesterday.

There's a final folded slip of paper tucked into one of the journal pages like a bookmark. It's unsigned and undated, with most of it torn off, and reads:

I've completed his prototype for the Dark Urge. If I did the surgery myself, I'd

No more. It takes you a moment to recognise the handwriting as Imoen's.

You pack away the papers and eat.

"We are less than a tenday's travel from Crèche Rosymorn," says Lae'zel. She's back in commander mode now that she's full of broth. "There, a *ghustil* resides, with a working *zaith'isk*. Our savior, and our cure. Follow me to the mountain pass, and I *will* cure you."

"Then?" asks Gale.

Lae'zel shrugs.

"I will not keep you prisoner," she says. "I expect my people will march to Moonrise."

"I'd also be eager to investigate Moonrise," says Wyll. "But it depends on my patron. Perhaps I'll see you there, Lae'zel."

"I will order my subordinates to avoid slaying you on sight," says Lae'zel. Was that a twitch on her lips?

"I'm going home after the Crèche. Can't wait," says Karlach happily. "Pop in, say hi gith mum and dad, get cured, home for tea. Simple as."

You have serious doubts. It's never simple as.

Later, on the road, you show the others the Bhaalspawn File.

"I've never heard of it," says Gale.

But Karlach has. "That's Imoen," she says. "One of the Heroes of the Gate. The Bhaalspawn's step-sister. The stepdaughter of Bhaal. But she wasn't real."

Epilogue

The Temple District is the jewel of the city. It's beautiful, which is rare for Baldur's Gate.

Marble columns and sparkling copper roofs, clean and polished, to better honour the gods. The streets are never quiet here. The Gondian pilgrims and visiting worshippers weave between sightseers to the House of Wonder and roaming adventurers chasing questlines down the streets.

The sunlight streams through the stained-glass windows of the biggest temple to Mystra in the city, where wizards and mages stop to burn incense and inscribe scrolls. A statue of Kelemvor stands vigil over the Cemetery of Many Gods, his masked head bowed solemnly under his hood. At the back of the statue's plinth, nearly impossible to notice, someone has scratched the symbol of the Dark Sun; even at the foot of this tiny bit of graffiti someone has left a copper coin, the city's offering to the mad god Cyric. The white marble of the Unrolling Scroll, the temple of Oghma, sparkles in the sunlight at the corner between Temples and the Wide.

You'd never have known it had just been repaired. Nobody even remembers any kind of Mind Flayer ship anymore. Here in the Upper City, the richer district of Baldur's Gate, they hire Conjurers and Transmuters instead of builders. There's enough money in the city to drown a duck, and most of it never leaves this part of town. In the Lower they've swept the rubble off the streets and thatched the roofs back over, and that's as much as anybody can hope for.

Listen, and you'll hear the news-urchins shouting, over the din: *"Stories, stories, get them right here! Scandals, vandals, where to buy sandals – it's all here in the Baldur's Mouth Gazette!"*

It's no different to any other afternoon in Baldur's Gate. Although, if you keep listening, you'll hear the urchins continue:

"Lord Enver Gortash swears war against the Absolute! A deadly cult is closing in on Baldur's Gate! No new entry to Baldur's Gate permitted! Read all about it, read all about it!"

But very few people stop to keep listening, and even few care about what they hear. Here in Baldur's Gate, there's always somebody trying to end the world. As long as it's not your boss or your husband, then you just keep your head down and keep working. After all, there's always gold to be made in the Gate.

Aside from the news-urchins the streets are quiet this particular afternoon, although if you were new to the city you'd barely know it. It's the quiet time between the lunchtime rush after the Wide and the evening rush after the fishermen return, which means there's enough room to swing your elbows and the crowd isn't so loud that you can't hear yourself think. In some corners of Baldur's Gate, right now, there is something like silence.

Like here. The Singing Lute is a small pub in the Lower City, with a harbour view on one end and easy access to the street-markets on the other. It would be more popular, if the proprietor weren't so unpleasant, and if he didn't hate the business of owning a pub quite so much. He serves drinks, it seems, mainly on sufferance. His name is Tender Henk, although the denizens of Baldur's Gate have never known why. The half-orc bartender isn't tender, nor does he ever really tend the bar, if he can help it.

Tender Henk gives a grunt of annoyance when a figure walks through the doorway of the Singing Lute.

The figure is a human man, dark-haired, in a worn traveller's cloak. He's tall, well-muscled, but sharp -- something about his figure, his high cheekbones and sallow cheeks, no matter how much weight he might put on, suggests bones. He doesn't lower his hood as he enters.

"Afternoon," says the hooded man.

"Kitchen's closed till the House of Wonder rings," Henk grunts.

The man nods, indifferently. "Four of your finest ales, if you please," he says.

Henk grunts. A poshie, or a merc with notions. He doesn't like either of the types. Then again, Henk doesn't really like any type of customer.

Henk draws the pints into four dusty glasses and sets them on the bar, and the man carries them over to the only occupied table in the pub.

It's a four-seater. Three of the seats are normal. The fourth appears to have been chained to the floor and table by a set of spectral chains, its occupant tied with his hands behind his back.

The figure in chains is a scruffy, wiry sort, ferrety and rogue-shaped, and he strains against the chains with the mindless vicious anger of a rabid animal. His eyes are wide, and entirely devoid of sanity.

The chained madman screeches when the hooded man puts the pints on the table and sits.

"Traitor! Usurper!" shrieks the madman in chains. "You *debase* me! We – are – *GODS!*"

The hooded man shrugs, as though this is of no consequence, and sips his ale.

Tender Henk doesn't bat an eyelid. He's already back polishing the glasses. He has already forgotten the man in the hood, and the chains in the corner. As far as he's concerned, the pub is completely silent.

"I'm going to kill you someday," the madman hisses, "You know that, don't you? By the time I'm done with all of you, there won't be a throne left for your rotten, worthless hide to languish in!"

The hooded man pushes one of the glasses of ale across the table, to the madman in chains. The madman glares at it.

The hooded man calmly sips his ale. It's a true Baldurian bitter, cheap and acrid with the taste of cloakwood-barrels. It's been a long time since he drank ale like this, and he doesn't get many chances to do it these days at all.

"They say the Cult of the Absolute is closing in on Baldur's Gate," remarks the hooded man, conversationally.

"It'll be my hands closing in on your throat soon enough," the madman in chains growls.

The hooded man shrugs. "I see no reason not to be civil before then," he says.

The madman in chains spits onto the table. It sizzles. Tender Henk looks up, briefly; but, seeing nothing remarkable, he looks back at his polishing.

The hooded man keeps sipping his beer. The madman slumps back in the chair and starts to sulk, his chains rattling with the motion.

Someone new enters the pub. The hooded man gives a curt nod as a third human joins them at the table, this one a woman with raven hair and a starburst amulet around her neck.

"Oh," she says, with a note of disappointment. "*He's* here."

"He might as well be," says the hooded man, mildly. "He *is* one of our friends."

The woman gives a scoff of disgust as she takes the third chair. The glare that the chained madman is directing at her is just as hateful as the way in which she deliberately ignores him.

"Our worst enemy, you mean," says the woman.

"What's the difference, when you get to our age?" says the hooded man.

The woman frowns, but doesn't respond.

She takes her pint and gulps deeply, as though thirsty; then, without ever looking him in the eye, she gestures over the madman's pint-glass and conjures a drinking straw-reed in it.

The hooded man pushes the glass closer to the madman in chains, and, hatefully, the madman in chains bends his head towards the table and takes a pull on his beer.

"I'm surprised they invited him at all," says the woman.

"They haven't been the same after the Spellplague," says the hooded man. "They've become rather... political."

The man in chains shrieks, "The Unknowing! Let him come – I know his tricks. I know his tricks!"

"He's trying out 'them' now," says the woman. "All the wizards are doing it."

"It could be said that times change," says the hooded man.

This is, of course, a joke. Wizards have had colourful genders for all of Faerûnian history, and for these three day-drinkers, times never change.

Or they do, perhaps; just not quite at the same rate that the sun rises and sets over Baldur's Gate.

The three humans drink their beer in silence for a time. The silence between them is not exactly companionable, and it's not exactly awkward, either. It's familiar, worn and bland and hollow as a sock full of holes.

They don't need to speak. They are three people who know each other entirely too well, and without a single drop of love. That particular goblet of salty water was swallowed a long time ago.

"How are your wizards, anyway," says the hooded man.

The woman doesn't miss the note of derision in his voice, and she shoots him a glare. "Fine," she says, because she considers herself above responding to microaggressions about the way she spends her leisure moments.

The hooded man drinks his beer with a calculatedly neutral expression.

Then, because is not as flawless as she should be, at her level of seniority, she says, "It so happens that my *wizards* form the best current solution we have for the Absolute. You remember—"

"Your young suitor. Yes," mutters the hooded man. "I recall."

The woman rolls her eyes. This is an ancient argument.

"I don't remember asking for your judgement," she says coldly, "Practised as it may be."

The madman twitches. His chains rattle. He mutters, "Filthy harlot," but both of the others ignore him.

"My concern is only that it risks splitting your attention, playing with men," says the hooded man.

"I *like* men," snaps the woman. "They make me feel—"

"Human?" says the hooded man, raising his eyebrows, and glares at him.

The madman in chains is, naturally, mad – mad as a hatter, madder than mad – but he still has enough of his faculties to sigh scornfully as he watches the two bicker, forgetting his presence.

The hooded man and the woman lapse into silence only when someone new enters the bar, and they look up expectantly.

The fourth human to enter the Singing Lute is a bard, both handsome and beautiful, with black skin and salt-and-pepper hair tied in a large elaborate braid. Their armour is both gorgeous and woefully impractical. As the bard passes the bar they drop a handful of coins onto Tender Henk's bar. The beauty of the figure, and the rattle of coin, both fail to attract Tender Henk's attention.

They sashay over to their three companions, smiling brightly and warmly as any bard might greet three old friends.

"Hello, hello, hello! I must admit, I was afraid you wouldn't accept my invitation," says the bard, "But it heartens me to see that you haven't entirely lost your sense of fun."

The hooded man and the woman don't look especially like they're having fun. The bard flops into chair left for them, presses two fingers to their lips, and kisses them; then they tap the rim of their pint-glass, and it transforms into a delicate flute of sparkling wine.

The bard raises the wine glass. "To our friendship," they say, smirking, and sip.

The hooded man and the woman exchange glances. The woman arches an eyebrow. The hooded man crosses his arms. (The madman drinks.)

"I expect there's a reason you brought us here, rabble-rousing aside," says the hooded man.

"Does there need to be?" asks the bard, the picture of innocence. "We're just old friends meeting to socialise."

"As you like," says the hooded man. The woman smirks to herself.

It's clear that neither of them believe him, but they drink, nonetheless.

"We rarely meet like this," remarks the woman, after a while quietly nursing her cheap ale.

"Indeed," says the hooded man. "Ours are not roles that encourage socialising." It's impossible to tell, with the blank stone mask he wears for an expression, if he's being wry.

The bard hums thoughtfully, and shrugs. "Perhaps it should," they say. "Perhaps that's the problem."

The hooded man grunts skeptically, which makes the bard let out a peal of musical laughter.

"Come now! I've long held the belief that if you can't step out into the world and enjoy a drink and a conversation with old friends, then existence can hardly be worth maintaining." They spread their hands. "Besides, it keeps us sane."

Their fingers float too close to the chained madman, and the chained man quickly jerks his head and attempts to bite the bard's fingertips. The bard withdraws them quickly, grinning as one might at a teething puppy.

"*Thief! Parasite! Abomination!*" shrieks the madman in chains.

"Well, some of us, at any rate," says the bard. "He's never had much of a sense of humour, has he?"

"No," says the hooded man. "I expect that's why his mind broke. He couldn't cope with the pressure without a sense of irony."

"I have no recollection of your sense of humour," says the woman.

"I had the strength of character and spirit to appreciate a joke when I heard one, at least," says the hooded man. "Hawksguard told me a joke, once."

"Oh?" says the bard. "What was it?"

The hooded man hesitates momentarily. "Well – I don't remember," he says briskly, "It was a long time ago. But it was very funny."

The bard snorts. They rest their chin in their hand, golden eyes glittering.

"When was that?" says the woman.

"Zhentil Keep – the battle. His last words, and he used them to lighten my spirits..."

"What, and you don't even remember the joke?" says the bard.

"I remember the gesture," says the hooded man. "Do the words matter?"

"Very much so! Always! Oh, dear, you really *are* uncivilised." The bard sighs melodramatically.

"Mortals live and die... and the gods are never truly alive. Only words live forever. We should carry the last words of great men!"

"I don't know if Hawksguard was a *great* man," says the hooded man.

"He was a *good* man," says the woman. "That's what matters, in the end. He was a good man."

"Better than I," says the hooded man gloomily, "It is not for my heroism that he died and I – did not die."

The woman glances furtively at the hooded man, as though this remark worries her. But his face is, as ever, an unreadable stone mask.

The madman in chains throws back his head and gives a loud, uproarious cackle.

"Oh, how marvellous it would be to die!" he screams. "How fantastic! How utterly rapturous, to be freed from the filth of existence and experience the true depth of nothingness! How wonderful! I shall relish it deeply, when you are all finally dead, and only I am left!"

They ignore him.

"Thurbrand, too," says the woman. "He had a good heart."

"How long ago it seems," murmurs the hooded man. "I forget there was ever a time we were adventurers."

"You still are," the bard smiles. "At least while you're sitting in this pub, in this moment."

There's something about the bard that marks them as different to the others, although they all appear to be humans with a somewhat adventurous look. Perhaps it's something in those beautiful eyes, a glimmer of something ancient and long-forgotten at the back of the pupils. Certainly the bard looks at the others with a slow, indulgent smile, like they're children, and like they know something that the others don't.

The woman says, "And – that party member we had for a while. The halfling. What was his name? The rogue..."

"Sneakabout," says the madman in chains, in a moment of uncharacteristic helpfulness.

The woman and the hooded man nod.

"Sneakabout, yes, that's what we called him," says the woman. "There's three men who deserved better than the world gave them."

"We all did, I think," says the hooded man.

"I'll drink to that," says the woman gloomily.

They clink their glasses together as the bard watches, serene, a smirk playing on their face. The hooded man, sullenly, dips his chin and drinks his ale.

"I do love it when you three reminisce," the bard says happily.

The woman sighs. "Well, I know you're eager to explain – what's happening here? Where is this?"

It's a well-known fact that, as omnipotent, all-knowing beings, the gods on Faerûn can appear wherever and whenever they like, and that their power and attention is never fully focused on one place.

It's a lesser-known fact that gods aren't supposed to go to the pub together. It's not against the rules, per se; it's just the kind of thing Ao, God of Gods, Keeper of the Balance, considers unprofessional. That's why they do it in times and places like this, in the corners of the universe where Ao is unlikely to be looking on a Twosday afternoon.

The bard beams at the question. They are, after all, a bard – telling stories is what they relish. They clear their throat theatrically, lifting the strap from around their neck; Tender Henk doesn't notice as the bard pulls out their chair and sets the yardling in their lap, although when the bard strums and produces a beautiful chord Henk looks up, briefly, as though startled. He fails to see the source of the sound, though he glances around, searching for something, for a moment.

The bard plucks out a gentle melody.

"Don't sing it," cautions the hooded man.

The bard scoffs. "Well! It seems you can take the brute out of the mercenary company, but you can't teach him good taste."

"I prefer information delivered directly. I remember how it was to have time to waste, you know." The hooded man waves a hand. "I'll tell the story if you don't – the seneschal's reports have been detailed enough."

"Fine, fine," sighs the bard. "In the old style, then..."

Their fingers dance. They play a low, fast melody, one coiling with tension and drama; the hooded man watches the theatrics, his expression somewhat hidden by his hood, as the woman leans back in her chair, a bemused smile creeping across her face. The madman thrashes and yelps, as though the music hurts him to hear;

"Hark well, then, travellers, and I'll tell you the tale," says the bard, "A story about the murmurations of gods and the follies of mortals. This is a tale of follies of mortals and the games of gods – the tale of the Absolute, the outer planes, and Bhaal's unfortunate so-called stepdaughter.

"Long, long ago, before the writing of history and the crowning of Re, the planes were ruled not by the pantheon of the gods but by the Illithid Empire," says the bard. "Every corner of existence

was controlled in every aspect by an Elder Brain, and every mortal's mind belonged to the Illithids. Nobody knows when it was that Gith led her rebellion..."

The hooded man raises a hand. The bard pauses.

"Can't you skip ahead to the relevant parts?" sighs the hooded man.

The bard's eyes narrow. They repeat, as though this is profane, "*Skip ahead?*"

"I agree. This isn't a game," says the woman. "We *know* about the mind flayers and the Absolute and the Dead Three, and you know that. Get to the point -- what's different here?"

The bard eyeballs the two of them for a long time. It's hard to tell if the bard is really very deeply offended, or just pretending. Everything they say seems a *bit* performative.

"Well," says the bard, "There was a lovely lady named Eve who worked at the Unrolling Scroll Temple Academy, who now has an Illithid tadpole..."

The woman waves a hand impatiently.

"What's different that *matters?*" she presses. The bard raises their eyebrows in amusement.

The madman cackles. Quietly at first, then louder. Then, hysterically, he screeches. Loud, cruel mirth erupts from him like vomit as he struggles against his chains, his skin red with the effort of constant pressing for escape.

"What matters? What *matters?*" he screams. "Nothing! Nothing! None of it matters! They're all just meat, just shapes, just names! They're not real, none of them! Only we are real. *Only I am real!*"

"Now, now," says the bard reproachfully. Then they say: "It's Imoen. And her brother."

The woman's eyes widen, and her pupils shrink, a terrible ripple of fear running over her face. The hooded man goes very, very still.

Gods aren't afraid of much at all, but these are just two humans, and those two humans look like they're horrified.

The madman laughs, and laughs, and laughs. He laughs like it's the funniest joke in the world. He laughs as though he might die. And the bard quietly smiles.

End Notes

That was long, wasn't it? This story took about 16 months to complete! Thanks for reading along with me.

Thank you to Samothy, Fen, Kaine, Dana, and Laurel from the Elturel Tiefling Discord for kindly donating their names to Eve's students and coworkers! You may have them back... for now.

Glossary of Irish terms: "Cú" = "hound", the insult used by Ethel for Wyll; "A thaisce mo chroi" = "My heart's treasure", a lyric from the Lichnee-song.

Eve and her friends will return in Part 2: *Apprentice of Irenicus*.